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ELLERY QUEEN'S

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JUNE THOMSON

51ST ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

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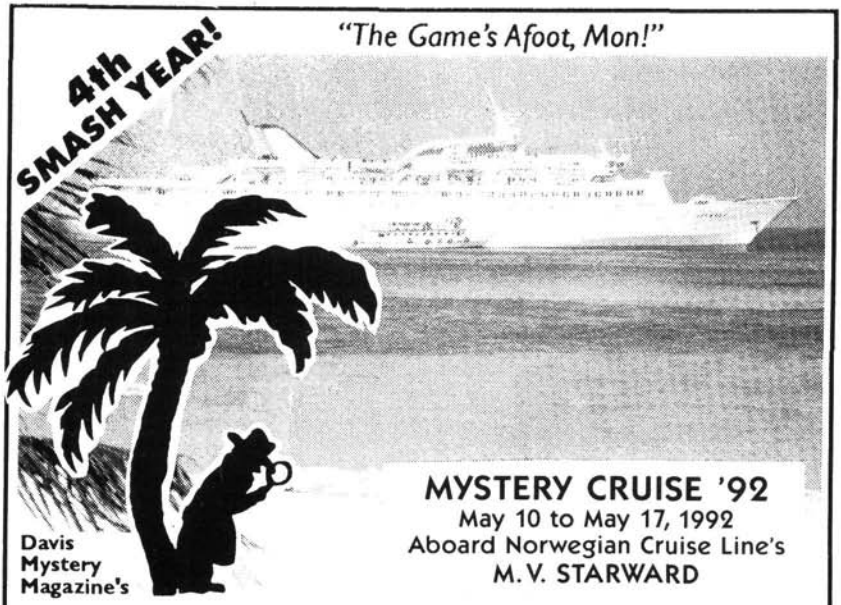

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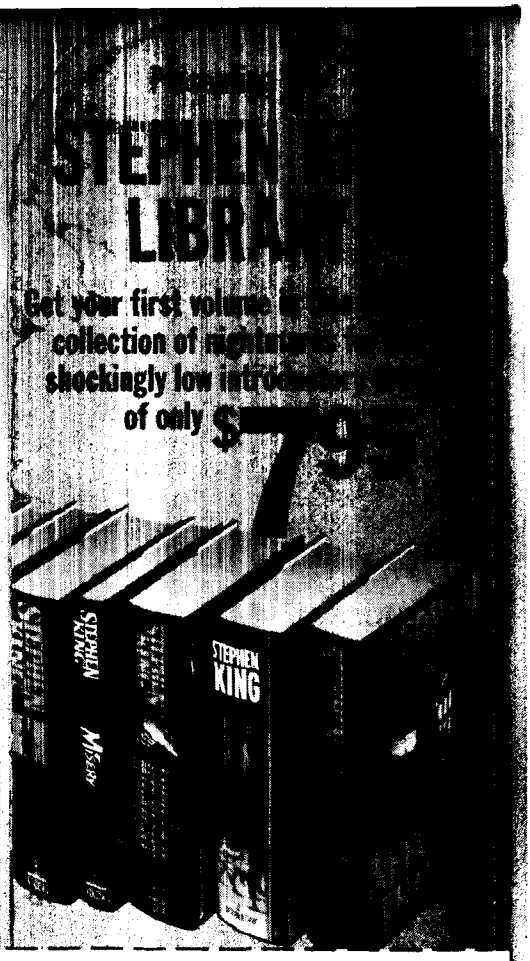

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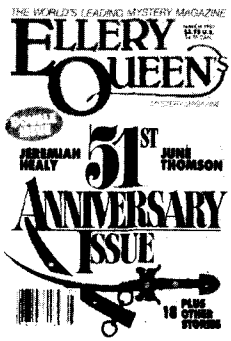

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a ***NEW*** short story by

JUNE THOMSON

In Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers, *June Thomson remarks, "I am interested in the personality of the outsider—the person who doesn't quite fit in with his environment. I use a country setting because I know it and feel I can understand the kind of relationships, close and closed, that can develop in a community with its own special loyalties and tensions." A theme she returns to in "Secrets" when a seven-year-old boy relocated with another family just prior to the outbreak of WW II meets with a hostile reception . . .*

SECRETS

by JUNE THOMSON

Yesterday I went to my sister Naomi's funeral. It was a sad little ceremony, attended by only a few people, mostly acquaintances whom she had made in Rochester, where she had lived for the past fifteen years since her second divorce. I had the feeling none of them were close friends. Naomi had never possessed the gift of intimacy, not with either of her husbands and certainly not with me, her younger brother.

As a child, I had both envied and admired her. Thin and long-legged, she could outrun almost any boy of her own age and knew how to bowl overarm like a professional. Nothing frightened her, not even father. At the same time, I was intimidated by her self-assurance and the intensity of her determination.

It was largely for this reason that we had grown apart, but not entirely.

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As her coffin was lowered into the grave, I thought: It's too late now to ask her what really happened all those years ago on the cliff-top in Cornwall.

It was towards the end of August 1939, shortly before the outbreak of the war, when Naomi was thirteen and I was seven; one of those perfect summers of long, hot days and impeccable skies which one remembers all one's life as part of a vanished childhood. The fear of war seemed only to add an extra dangerous glitter to the sea.

As we did every year, we spent that summer at the small, white-washed house our parents owned in the fishing village of Portmerron on the north Cornish coast. From its windows, we could look out at the sea and the surrounding cliffs, towering above the little harbour. At night, we went to sleep to the sound of waves slapping up against the rocks or sucking at the sand and, in the morning, we were wakened by the screams of the gulls.

But that summer, there were two changes to our usual holiday routine. For the first time that I could remember, my father wasn't able to join us. Because of the crisis, all leave had been cancelled at the Foreign Office where he worked.

And Edward Wilson came to stay.

"Why does he have to?" Naomi demanded when Mother broke the news to us one morning over breakfast.

Mother laid down the letter from Mrs. Wilson she had been reading.

"Because his father's been called up into the air force and his mother wants Edward to stay with us while she finds somewhere to live near to where he's been posted," she explained in that reasonable voice she often adopted with Naomi, rarely with me. It was only years later, when I heard myself using the same tone, that I realised it was her way of avoiding a confrontation.

"But he's stupid!"

Mother came close to losing her patience.

"I won't have you saying that, Naomi! And please remember you're to be nice to him. He's going to feel lonely here at first without his parents. I want you and Tom to make friends with him."

"I don't care what she says, he is stupid," Naomi asserted when, breakfast over, we walked down to the beach.

I nodded, knowing better than to disagree with her, although I secretly thought that anyone whose father was in the air force couldn't be entirely contemptible. I imagined Mr. Wilson in a leather

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helmet, like Biggles, flying over vast continents laid out below him and coloured red as they were in my school atlas. As for Edward, I had no clear recollection of him. His mother and mine were old childhood friends who had kept in touch, although they rarely met after the Wilsons moved to Reading. The last time I had seen him had been two years before at a Christmas circus in London, but it was the clowns I remembered more vividly than him.

He arrived two days later, accompanied by his mother, who left the same evening to return to Reading.

Even now my memories of him are far from clear for I have difficulty in distinguishing my childhood image of him from my sister's.

To her, he was merely a nuisance, a fat lump of a child who tagged along after us, spoiling our games, who couldn't swim and was hopeless at beach cricket. As if through her eyes, I saw him toiling after us across the sand, his face moist under his linen sunhat, calling out in a constant wail, "Wait for me!" Her private nickname for him was the Vest, because of the white singlet he always wore under his shirt. With her talent for mockery, she made up a song about him to the tune of Bobby Shaftoe:

> Edward Wilson wears a vest,
> He is nothing but a pest,
> Let's lock him in a great big chest,
> Soppy Edward Wilson.

When Mother was present, she would hum the tune under her breath or tap out its rhythm on the table until Mother, not understanding the joke but suspecting it was directed at Edward, told her to stop. After that, she only hummed or tapped in front of him, enticing me with a sideways smile to join in the fun.

My own memories of him, those not influenced by Naomi's attitude, are different. Because the house was small, we had to share a bedroom, which I resented at first until I came to enjoy his company. Generous with his possessions, he let me borrow his Rupert annuals or look through his stamp collection. But I remember him best sitting cross-legged on his bed, a round-faced, fair-haired boy of my own age, wearing blue and white striped pyjamas, his teddy bear, Benjy, perched on the pillow beside him, and discussing with me in his grave, adult manner those subjects, such as football and model trains, which small boys of seven find mutually absorbing.

He wanted to be a boffin when he grew up, like his father. At the time, I didn't know what the word meant.

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"What's a boffin?" I asked.

Instead of laughing at me for my ignorance as Naomi would have done, he answered me quite seriously.

"It's someone who does research. Daddy's an expert in radio. That's why he's been called up into the air force."

"I thought your father was a pilot."

"Oh, no," he corrected me proudly, as if it was far better to be a boffin than to fly a plane. "He's part of a very special team that's been set up somewhere in Scotland to test out new equipment. Actually, it's terribly secret and I'm not supposed to say anything about it in case the Germans find out. So you must promise not to tell."

In giving him my word, I sealed a bond with him, the true nature of which I wasn't to understand until later.

It was largely on Edward's account that towards the end of the week Mother suggested that the three of us go on the bus that afternoon into Trewarth, the small seaside resort about six miles away.

"Do we have to go?" Naomi cried.

For once, Mother was adamant.

"It'll make a change and besides, Edward hasn't seen anything of Cornwall yet apart from the beach. Now, I've looked up the times of the buses. If you get the one straight after lunch, you'll have two hours to spend in Trewarth before catching the half-past-four bus home."

"But there's nothing to do in Trewarth!"

"Nonsense! Of course there is," Mother said brightly. "There's the promenade and the donkeys and the Punch and Judy show on the beach."

Even Naomi realized that it was useless to argue, although she grumbled under her breath to me that it was all the Vest's fault as we went upstairs to get ready for the excursion.

"Silly idiot!" she muttered, slamming her bedroom door shut behind her.

As we left, Mother called out last instructions to us from the front steps.

"Keep together so you won't lose one another and hold hands when you cross the road. And don't miss the half-past-four bus home. Naomi, did you hear me?"

If she did, Naomi made no sign. Her brow like thunder, she stalked off down the road towards the bus stop outside the Portmerron Arms, her long brown legs flashing in and out under the skirt of the hated

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dress which Mother had made her wear for the occasion, while Edward and I trotted beside her, in clean shirts and shorts, our hair sleeked back with water.

The bus ride was enjoyable but Naomi was right about Trewarth. Once the temporary excitement of the shops and the holiday crowds had worn off, there was very little to do. Caged in between the breakwaters, the sea seemed tame after Portmerron as it lapped languidly up the beach. There were no rocks here to climb, no hidden pools to discover. There wasn't even room to run about, for the beach was strewn with deckchairs and the slumbering bodies of sunbathers.

There were, however, donkeys—a sullen line of them, heads hanging low in the heat, the sand around them stained with their droppings, on which the blowflies buzzed and feasted. Edward refused a ride on one of them, wrinkling up his nose in disgust at the smell.

As for the Punch and Judy show, we had missed most of the performance. Using this as an excuse, Naomi made us stand at the back among the grownups, although I suspected her pride wouldn't let her join the semicircle of little children seated on the sand in front of the booth. With her arms tightly folded across her chest, her disapproval made itself so apparent that neither Edward nor I dared to join in the laughter, not even when Punch seized the stick and beat the policeman over the head with it.

When the curtains closed and the Punch and Judy man emerged from the back to pass round the hat, she dragged us away.

"What are we going to do now?" Edward asked plaintively as we crunched up the beach towards the promenade.

"I don't know. I said the place was boring," Naomi replied in an I-told-you-so voice.

I was going to suggest that we go to the penny amusement arcade when Edward noticed a sign at the top of the steps, pointing to a museum.

"I want to go there," he said.

"You won't like it," Naomi warned him.

"Yes I will."

He came to a halt in the middle of the pavement and stood there facing her, plump legs set apart and an expression on his face not unlike Naomi's when she was determined to get her own way.

"I want to go," he repeated.

My sister sighed in the same way Mother did when faced with our intractability, usually Naomi's, but, to my surprise, she gave in.

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Perhaps she realized that she had gone too far in spoiling our afternoon and word might get back to Mother.

"Oh, all right then. Come on!"

Seizing us by the hands, she hurried us across the road at the traffic lights and into a side street where the museum was situated in a grey stone building, up three steps.

It was sixpence each to go in. Naomi clicked her tongue at this exorbitant amount, although I had the feeling that she secretly enjoyed the importance of paying over the half-crown which Mother had given to her for spending money and being handed the tickets by the lady in the kiosk from a big yellow roll.

"I'll look after them," she told us, putting them away, together with the change, into her navy-blue school purse which hung on a strap over the front of her dress and which Mother had made her take with her. She kept us waiting while she snapped the button fastener firmly shut before leading the way inside.

After the heat and glare of the town, the interior was as cool and as dim as a church. Long, cream-coloured blinds drawn down over the windows kept out the sun. As we entered, our footsteps rang out on the stone floor.

There were only two rooms, the first devoted to the wildlife of the area, almost entirely stuffed seabirds, perched on pieces of rock or squatting on meagre nests of twigs and pebbles. Their malevolent black eyes glared at us through the dusty glass of their cases.

Naomi made us stay together and we trailed after her from one display to the next while she read out loud to us from the explanatory cards fixed to the wall at the side of each exhibit.

" 'The Great Black-Backed Gull, *Larus marinus,*' " she intoned in a loud, clear voice, " 'is common along the North Cornish coast where it nests singly or in colonies. Larger than the Herring Gull, it is distinguished by its heavy bill, its black wings, and pinkish legs. A predator, it will steal the eggs and young of other seabirds.' "

Several people turned round to look, as if we really were in church and ought to be silent, but Naomi only tossed her head and went on with the readings until Edward and I began to fidget and finally even she grew tired of the game. When we moved into the second room, given over to local history, she allowed us to go off on our own, Edward hanging back to look at a case of Roman finds, mostly old coins and bits of broken pottery, while I made straight for one of two large exhibits set up in alcoves on each side at the further end of the room.

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It was a tableau depicting a smugglers' cave, lit by only the yellow glow from two lanterns, standing on papier-mâché rocks, which cast eerie shadows over the bearded faces of three men, bending down over brandy casks and large, oilskin-wrapped parcels, labeled "Tobacco" in case there was any doubt about their contents. But I was puzzled by the treasure chest, open and carelessly spilling out ropes of pearls, jewelled coronets, and great handfuls of gold coins which, taken with the black eye-patch one of the figures was wearing, suggested pirates rather than smugglers.

Unless, of course, they were meant to be wreckers as well.

Father had told us about the wreckers, how they stood on the cliffs with lanterns, luring ships onto the rocks, and then plundered their cargoes.

I started to walk towards Naomi in order to ask her opinion.

She was standing, totally absorbed, in front of the other tableau, although I caught only a glimpse of it before she whirled about as I approached.

Behind her, I could see the interior of a darkened room—a hut, perhaps, or a primitive cottage. Curious objects, bundles of dried herbs, leather bottles and crude earthenware jars, hung down from the low, beamed ceiling or were scattered about the floor beside an open fire over which a big, black pot was suspended from a chain. In the lurid glow from a red bulb, not quite concealed under the logs and the scarlet crepe-paper flames, I could dimly discern the silhouette of a woman, crouching beside the hearth, a black cat at her side and a broom made out of sticks propped up in a corner.

There was something sinister about the setting but before I could examine it more closely, Naomi had whisked me round so that I had my back to it.

"What do you want?" she demanded fiercely.

"Nothing," I stammered. "I was only going to ask you about the smugglers."

"There isn't time," she retorted, looking at the boy's watch strapped to her wrist. "We have to go now."

Pushing me in front of her by the shoulder, she collected up Edward and swept the pair of us out of the museum and along the street to the promenade.

We were almost a quarter of an hour too early for the bus. There would have been time for us to go to the penny arcade and to have had a turn on the crane or one of the pin-tables or, better still, the mechanical model of the death of Mary Queen of Scots and to have

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made the little figures jerk into action, especially the executioner who brought his axe crashing down to send the poor Queen's head tumbling from her shoulders.

Naomi wouldn't let us. We might miss the bus and then Mother would be cross.

But she relented far enough to buy Edward and me each a triangular stick of orange ice cream from the Wall's Stop-Me-And-Buy-One tricycle on the sea-front and then left us by the bus stop, sucking at the sweet, frozen juice which made our teeth ache and which tasted of the cardboard container while she disappeared inside Boot's the Chemist a little way up the street.

She was back within minutes, the pocket of her dress bulging with something in a white paper bag which she refused to show us.

"It's none of your business," she said briskly, just like Mother and then, spitting on her handkerchief, began to scrub our faces clean for the journey home.

We were silent on the bus, too dazed by the sun and the heat to talk. Edward and I sat together, Naomi occupying a seat by herself on the other side of the aisle, as if she had nothing to do with us.

"I think a bath and early bed tonight," Mother said over tea, seeing our flushed faces.

"I'm not tired," Naomi said. Indeed, she looked bursting with energy and purpose. "I was thinking of walking up to the cliff-top with Tom. We haven't been there yet this holiday. Edward needn't come if he doesn't want to."

He took up the challenge as I think he was meant to.

"But I'd like to go, too. I haven't been there either."

Mother looked doubtful.

"I don't know, Edward. It's a long walk and you've had a very busy day."

"I'm not a bit tired, honestly," he assured her, his face stricken. "Oh, please, Mrs. Mortimer!"

Mother capitulated.

"Very well then, you may go, but only if you promise to keep to the path and not go near the edge."

"I promise," he said solemnly. "Cross my heart."

Mother turned to address Naomi, who had been watching this exchange with her head on one side and a little smile on her face, oddly triumphant.

"You heard that, Naomi?"

Naomi nodded, tossing back her hair as she got up from the table.

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"I'm going upstairs to take off this stupid dress," she announced.

But she didn't, not straight away, for I heard the back door close behind her and it was several minutes after Edward and I had gone up to our room to change our clothes as well that she finally came upstairs.

Mother must have heard her, too, for she went out into the hall *to call up to her.*

"Naomi, what are you doing in my bedroom?"

Naomi's voice was raised in reply.

"I'm looking for the nail scissors."

"What do you want them for?"

There followed one of those silences which children use with such effect to draw attention to an adult's obtuseness.

"To cut my nails with."

Of course, silly, was the unspoken rider.

"Then put them back when you've finished with them," Mother said sharply.

Even so, Naomi was ready before us and came banging on our door, calling out impatiently, "Come on, you two! Hurry up!"

The path started at a stile only a few yards from the house and, after crossing a small field of rough grass, began the long, slow climb upwards round the side of the cliff.

Naomi went first, striding ahead of us in her boy's khaki shorts and her white aertex blouse, as vigorous and intrepid as an explorer leading an expedition into unknown territory. Scrambling after her, I could see her sharp elbows pumping in and out and her long dark hair, held back by an elastic band, bouncing purposefully between her shoulder blades.

Behind me, Edward, puffing up the slope, kept calling out every few yards, "Wait for me!"

I stopped unwillingly for him, torn between a reluctance to abandon him and an eagerness to catch up with my sister, remembering her assertion as we had started off that the last one at the top would be a sissy.

At last, the path rounded the shoulder of the cliff and the view burst upon us in a sudden, dazzling revelation of sky and sea. It was like entering into another world where all the familiar dimensions, seen at ground level, were expanded to new and dizzying proportions. The sky was a vast, circular, blue immensity, extending around us on all sides, unobstructed by rooftops or masts or chimney pots.

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As for the sea, it lay below us, almost motionless at that height, its silvery surface, faintly crinkled, stretching out for miles and miles to a far-off smudged purple line which was the horizon.

We could look down not only on the sea but on the gulls, circling beneath or suspended, pinned and screaming, against the wind.

And how it blew up there! It met us head-on as Edward and I came panting round the last bend in the path to find Naomi already on the headland, straining forward into its blast like the figurehead on a sailing ship. It had snatched the band from her hair, which was tossing in wild gusts about her head.

It even tore the words from her mouth as she turned to speak to us until, laughing with exhilaration, she flung herself down on the grass, out of its grasp.

We joined her, I lying prone beside her, Edward sitting more decorously with his legs crosssed as he did on his bed at home.

"I said, Isn't it wonderful up here?" Naomi repeated. "Better than horrible old Trewarth and the soppy museum. Aren't you glad you came?"

She was looking directly at Edward who, still breathless from the climb, nodded dumbly.

There was a brilliance about her which had nothing to do with the sunlight or the sea.

And then, as if already bored with sitting still, she leapt to her feet and the wind reclaimed her, whipping at the legs of her shorts and her shirtsleeves so that they cracked like flags.

"Don't you wish you could fly?" she shouted, raising her arms above her head. "I do! I'd fly all over the world, to Africa and Asia and China."

"China's in Asia," Edward pointed out.

He was watching her uneasily, dazzled by her glitter and yet wary of it.

"I know that, stupid!"

Swooping down, she seized him by the shoulders and lugged him to his knees.

"Come on! Let's try!"

"Don't be silly," he said, squirming under her grip. "People can't fly."

"Your father does."

Proud though he was of his father, Edward didn't contradict her and I realised then how seriously he regarded the secret he had confided in me; too precious to be told even to Naomi. It was the

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first time in my life I had ever shared a secret with anyone other than her.

But he was too honest, or perhaps too naive, to lie and instead, he replied obliquely, "That's in an airplane with an engine."

"You don't need an airplane. There's gliders and hot-air balloons. They don't have engines," Naomi retorted.

Even I knew she was right. As for Edward, he was reduced to silence.

Feeling in the pocket of her shorts, she took out a small white jar with a blue lid, its sides still patched with little bits of paper where the label had been scraped off.

"Or there's this," she added.

"What is it?" Edward asked.

"It's flying ointment."

Edward looked at her sceptically.

"There isn't such a thing."

"Yes, there is."

"*Where did you get it from then?*"

"Never you mind. It's a secret, isn't it, Tom?" she said, inviting me to join in the conspiracy even though I didn't understand it. "Smell it."

Taking off the lid, she thrust the jar under Edward's nose. He drew back, pulling a face.

"It's horrible."

"It's meant to be. It's a very special ointment made from magic herbs which only grow in jungles or on the top of high mountains."

"Can I have a smell?" I pleaded.

She waved the opened jar in front of my face, long enough for me to see that it contained a thick, white substance, with exactly the same appearance and scent as the cold cream Mother used, except it was flecked with green morsels of what looked like leaves, snipped up small, which gave off the sharp, distinct aroma of mint.

For the first time, I began dimly to make the connection between the tableau in the museum and Naomi's visit to the chemist's and the back garden at home. The incident with Mother's nail scissors also fell into place together with scraps of half-remembered knowledge from the children's encyclopedia.

"Didn't witches use flying ointment?" I asked.

Naomi glanced at me approvingly, as if I had said the right thing for once.

"Of course they did. They used to rub it into themselves, like this."

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Dipping two fingers into the jar, she smeared the cream onto Edward's bare legs and arms below his shorts and shirt sleeves, rubbing it hard into his skin.

"It tingles," he complained.

"It's meant to," Naomi told him. "That means the magic's working. Now stand up and see if you can fly."

He scrambled reluctantly to his feet, his knees and elbows glistening, stained here and there with the green juice from the little bits of leaves.

"Go on!" Naomi ordered. "Don't just stand there like a ninny. Wave your arms up and down, like me."

Kneeling upright, she began to flap her own arms. As if mesmerised, Edward mimicked her, slowly at first and then more eagerly as the rhythm seized him.

"Harder!" she shouted into the wind. "Harder! That's better. And now run!"

He ran, beating his arms up and down, his legs working like pistons as the wind claimed him and, as if it were a huge hand thrusting against his back, propelled him faster and faster down the slopes.

"Don't go near the edge!" Naomi shrieked.

But the warning came too late.

As the wind caught her words and whirled them away, he, too, arms flailing, went spinning off into space.

I must have jumped to my feet although I wasn't aware of doing so, only of Naomi clutching me by the ankle in so fierce a grip that her fingers burned through my socks down to the skin. I couldn't see her face for the tears that were pouring down mine and a terrible blankness of vision at the horror of it all. But I heard her voice quite distinctly.

"Walk! Don't run!"

I obeyed her numbly, following her across the cliff and copying her when she dropped down to wriggle forwards on her stomach for the last few yards.

Lying side by side, we peered down over the edge.

Far, far below was the beach we played on, so diminished in size that it seemed nothing more than a tiny, pale crescent of sand. To the left, something else pale lay on its face in the water, gently lifting and falling in the waves like a piece of flotsam.

"It wasn't our fault," Naomi said. "He tripped."

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"Did he?" I asked. I couldn't remember that, only his feet in his brown Clark's sandals slithering frantically over the short, slippery grass.

"Yes, he did. He was running when he tripped and fell. I told him not to go near the edge."

That part at least was true.

"It wasn't our fault," Naomi repeated. "He was stupid. He wouldn't do what he was told. That's what we have to tell Mummy. But you're not to say anything about this," she added. She was holding in her hand the white jar of flying ointment. Getting carefully to her feet, she flung it far out to sea with that powerful overarm action which I so much envied.

"Why not?" I asked, watching as it made a wide arc through the air before disappearing into the dazzle of the sea.

"Because it was a joke," she explained, dropping down again beside me. "Just a joke. But Mummy wouldn't understand and she'd be terribly, terribly angry with both of us. So would Daddy."

And so I was drawn into the conspiracy after all, one of silence, compounded of the fear of adult anger and a sense of awful guilt which I couldn't understand myself and which, for that very reason, I could never have expressed to anyone else.

So the truth, whatever it might have been, never came out, never even at the inquest at which, I learned later, a verdict of accidental death was returned.

Naomi and I didn't go to the funeral; only our parents attended. By that time, war had been declared and we had been sent away to stay with our grandparents in Wiltshire where we remained for the rest of the war, safe from the air raids on London.

Things were never the same again. That was the last summer we spent at the house in Cornwall. Later, it was requisitioned for evacuees from Southampton and, after the war, my parents sold it.

I have never returned to Portmerron; neither, as far as I know, had Naomi, although I can't be certain of that.

As I explained at the beginning, we drifted apart as we grew older, the gap which had always existed between us becoming wider over the years until finally we communicated with each other only out of a sense of duty, exchanging cards at birthdays or Christmas.

Watching as her coffin was lowered into the ground, I thought again of Edward, the first real friend I ever had. But it was too late to find the answer to the question I should have asked Naomi all those years ago on that Cornish cliff-top.

"Did you really mean him to die?" ●

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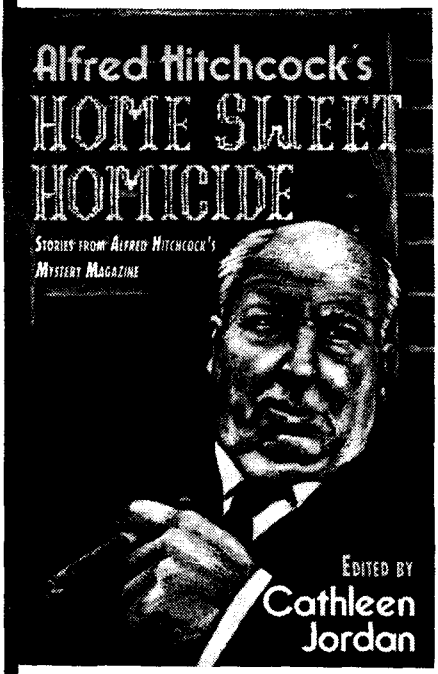

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a *NEW* short story by

THOMAS ADCOCK

"Dope!" I said to him. Roger turned. I asked, "Must you read such puerile slop? Do you even know the meaning of the word puerile?"

He put down the paperback novel and smiled. "No, I don't happen to know that word," he said, "but I'll tell you something I do know. I promise you'll be interested. It's about you, sweetums . . ."

Thomas Adcock has written a number of stories for EQMM. *His latest novel,* Dark Maze, *published by Pocket Books in December, features Neil Hockaday, a character who debuted in the March, 1986 issue of this magazine.*

MY DEAR DEAD DOPE

by THOMAS ADCOCK

I am looking at the two of them lying on the floor at opposite sides of the bedroom, and I'm laughing. Not out loud, of course. That would be crass, and besides—I don't want to tip off the neighbors that I'm here in the house. But here I am standing between them, looking at one corpse and then the other, and I am well aware that my lips are pulled back over my teeth and my eyes feel like they're dancing. I'm laughing, all right.

I really can't help myself! I mean, my dear is such a dope! Such a dear, dead dope. And his girlfriend, the blonde number pouring out nasty maroon bloodstains all over my nice tan and salmon Oushak rug . . . well, she looks common as tap water and so who's going to miss a bit of fluff?

And so I am laughing. Oh, I'm telling you—sometimes, murder is one great big joke.

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* * *

Roger, the body in the tuxedo who was my thirty-year-old husband up until a few minutes ago, had it coming if ever a man did. And I don't mean because of Blondie. She just happened to be there right after I did it to Roger. She was a surprise to me. I didn't know Roger had thrown in with somebody so soon, but that's the way it looked. So, I had to do it to her, too. At the very least, she was a witness and she might even have been dumb enough to love him.

I should mention, too, that I don't mean Roger had it coming because he'd lately become a bore, or because he never was what you'd call an Einstein. And it's not because Roger was the kind of man who lived off a woman, namely me. He'd been sweet enough to make me sometimes believe that I wasn't twenty years his senior; he was eager enough in bed; and he made a nice appearance around my friends, so long as he kept his mouth shut. Which he generally did, except for asking some of them a lot of questions about my business.

I killed Roger for the good and simple reason that he lacked the grace and gratitude to settle for what I'd so generously signed over to him, including the deed to the house in Forest Hills and all the lovely furnishings I'd accumulated over the years. My lawyer told his lawyer that such largesse was my good-faith effort to prevent a long and ugly divorce proceeding. But for Roger, this was not enough. He had the gall to have his lawyer petition for alimony. Can you believe it?

Then *my* lawyer had the gall to advise, "Maybe under the—well, the circumstances, you should accede to the alimony request. You can afford it. And more than likely, he'll take up with somebody else of your—well, your stature, shall we say? Then I can haul him into court and strip away the alimony award if it makes you feel better."

Can you believe it? Of course I could afford Roger's alimony. That wasn't the point. It was the principle of the thing. I don't care for blackmail, which is exactly what Roger and his lawyer were up to. And I didn't much care for my own damn lawyer's crack about my *stature*. I don't like being addressed as some fool rich lady who doesn't know the score when it comes to men as young and handsome as Roger. Hell, I know the game—and I've got the heartaches to prove it.

Before Roger, there were others. They took everything they wanted and then left me alone, crying for what I never had from

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them. Can you believe it? Me, a big-time New York bank executive lady—crying! Me, face-down on my pretty feather bed with a box of Kleenex, bawling my head off because somebody with a cleft in his chin just dumped me?

So when it came to Roger, I resolved once and for all to keep a man. The proposition was straightforward: marriage or nothing. Roger took a few days to "consider the prospects," as he put it. Then he agreed to my terms. And then, before long, he proved far more trouble than he was worth.

I've already said my husband was a blackmailer, which suggests he might have had something over me. Well, he did. All those years of collecting little specks of dirt about me from my so-called friends added up one day to a swamp, and Roger's attorney made it painfully clear that I'd be swallowed up in the muck unless I saw things my husband's way. Which meant the house and its contents and the stiff alimony.

The initial showdown came on an otherwise pleasant and lazy Sunday in September. Anyone who saw us that day, lolling around the pool, would have sensed nothing especially menacing. If they heard us talking, they might have shrugged their shoulders and said something stupid like, "You know how married folks will have their little quarrels." Ah, but such is never merely so; wounded vanity is the worst punishment that men and women inflict on each other.

It was drawing toward noon on that Sunday. We'd finished our breakfast at poolside. I sat in a chaise longue with the *Times,* sipping a third mimosa. Roger sat at the edge of the pool with his feet dangling in the chlorinated water, drinking beer from a bottle and reading one of those paperback novels that my secretary with the ankle bracelet is so fond of reading.

"Dope!" I said to him. Roger turned. I asked, "Must you read such puerile slop? Do you even know the meaning of the word *puerile?"*

He put down the paperback novel and smiled. "No, I don't happen to know that word," he said, "but I'll tell you something I do know. I promise you'll be interested. It's about you, sweetums."

I did not like his tone. So I picked up the paper I'd already read and pretended to be reading it for the first time. But Roger kept it up.

"What I know, love, is all about two hundred and four loans and loan renewals you've authorized down at your bank for three fictitious and four actual corporate depositors." Roger paused. He always

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did have a good dramatic sense. He smiled like an alligator when I glanced up from my paper.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, and I'm sure you will," he said, "but the way I total it, your phony transactions have given you a running cover for the diversion of roughly forty million dollars. Which you've used as principal for your personal stock market investments, with more than a little help from brokerage houses that aren't fussy about capital sources."

"Gee, I'm impressed, Roger," I said. "You have discovered that fortunes don't come about by virgin birth."

"Yes, and I wonder if it will be as eye-opening a lesson for the I.R.S. and the D.A. as it's been for me," he said, grinning like an alligator again.

So there it was, blackmail pure and simple.

Roger was quite right about the scam I'd been running for years. Gradually, though, I had replaced the embezzled funds with a portion of the profits on my investments. I ask you: Who got hurt? And gradually, I had created a home that is a showplace of art and antiques. My friends would die for such a place. You'd think a greedy bastard like Roger might appreciate having a financial genius for a wife—wouldn't you?

"Exactly what are you suggesting?" I asked Roger, knowing exactly what he was suggesting.

"Once, you made me a blunt proposition and after considering the prospects, I went along." Roger enjoyed dragging this out. "I figured you were exactly the sort of crook you are, and also I figured your friends were the same or jealous. Either way, I knew I could count on loose tongues.

"And now, sweetums, I'm sure you'll agree that turnabout is fair play. So here's *my* proposition: we're getting divorced, and I'm coming out of it set up for life."

"You think you're smart, Roger?" I said, trying to keep my voice from rising. "You're nothing but a gigolo and a dope!"

Roger smiled before inflicting the fatal wound. Then he said, "And you're nothing but a middle-aged cow with money."

It was time to consider my prospects.

So first of all, I moved out of my beautiful house, which nearly killed me. I took an apartment in the city. Secondly, I hired an overpriced lawyer, which I knew wouldn't be promising but which would look like the proper thing to do. The third thing I did was begin to plan the perfect murder.

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It occurred to me that I could make a clean, simple job of it. After all, there were only two fundamentals to keep in mind: Roger was a dope, and I could take advantage of that.

Or maybe you don't think Roger is such a dope since he had my number? Well, I remind you that he's the one who is dead, along with Blondie—who, by the way, is the last thing a man needs when he's petitioning for alimony. I would also point out that it's no great shakes nowadays to assume that bankers and brokers and bond traders and the rest of us in the business of handling other people's money are about as pure as the driven slush. The newspapers run stories about us every day and Roger knows how to read, even though his literary tastes leave something to be desired.

But what, precisely, did Roger have in the way of dangerous facts to offer some young hot-shot assistant D.A.? The fact that I'd used corporate deposits as my own personal capital? So what? How about the fact that I'd paid it all back—plus interest, meaning that everybody concerned made money? How about the fact that the bank would never want to see me prosecuted for fear of bad publicity? So, what did Roger really have?

Nevertheless, my pricey lawyer has so far only managed to sit me down in a mahogany chair across from his mahogany desk, on top of which there is nothing but his well-tailored elbows and his ten manicured fingers clasped together in a tent, and tell me about the smelly mess that Roger could make of my career. And how a woman of my *stature* would be well-advised to turn over her beautiful home to a gigolo—and pay him alimony on top of it. Alimony, to a man who called me a cow!

Clearly, murder was the answer.

I had got away with some very complicated embezzlements for years. Murder would be a snap. My plan was devastatingly simple. I plotted it out on paper, then burned the paper. Practically all that was involved was my walking up to Roger and doing it to him.

The only risk I had, if you could call it a risk, was assuming that Roger wouldn't have bothered himself to change the locks on the house. I could simply let myself in with my own keys. Easy as pie.

I picked his thirtieth birthday as just the right night to kill him. Roger always loved to dress up and drive into Manhattan to celebrate his birthday, and I could calculate his every preparation. My dear dope was a creature of habit. I knew, for instance, that he would primp in front of the mirror of the English oak armoire in our bedroom just before leaving the house. That's when I'd do it! I

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would hide out on the bedroom balcony until he started primping, and then take away all the rest of his birthdays.

As an alibi, I had my secretary work out a combination business trip and long weekend vacation out in California. I even had her take me to the airport, and she waved good-bye to me as I boarded the plane for Los Angeles. But when the plane set down for a twenty-minute stopover at St. Louis, I got off and never reboarded. Instead, I left the St. Louis airport and caught a taxi and went straightaway to Union Station where I bought a train ticket in cash and rode back to New York. I could kill Roger, then hop the next plane out of La Guardia for L.A. long before anybody found my hubby's cold body.

When I got off the train at Grand Central Station in New York it was half-past eleven in the morning. I was tired and achey from the long rail trip. But I also felt an exhilaration. I wasn't simply returning home like hundreds of times before; this time, I was sneaking back into New York!

I put on my dark glasses, propped up my collar, pulled down my hat brim, and spent about an hour reading the papers in a coffee shop. I wanted to see if my hands would shake, knowing what they would be doing that night. Not a quiver.

I ventured out into Lexington Avenue since I had time to kill before killing Roger. I had to wait until three o'clock, since that was Roger's daily appointment at the gym. I would drop by the house while he was out and hide in the attic until the evening.

At the corner of Forty-fifth Street, I found a shop that sold big stretchy wool socks. I bought a pair. I had once read in a mystery novel that professional criminals wear wool socks over their shoes before breaking into some place in order to fool the forensics cops. Just in case, I thought. I also went over to the Hoffritz store on Madison Avenue and picked up a lovely big carving knife. Maybe I'd keep it after using it on Roger. Thanksgiving was coming up.

Finally, it was time to catch a taxi out to Forest Hills. Halfway over the Queensboro Bridge, I had a scribble of doubt since my driver kept talking about his "missus" and how she was "one swell kid" and all. But we pressed on and the feeling passed.

I had the driver let me off at a corner full of stone walls and big leafy trees and thick, high shrubbery so that nobody would notice my arrival. I kept close to the walls and shrubbery and made my way toward my house, went around back, and slipped the wool socks over my shoes and my key into the lock. I entered, easy as pie.

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The place was empty. And just as beautiful as the day I'd left. Exhaustion rushed through me. I would have given a lot to stretch out on the feather bed upstairs, in the room where I would be killing Roger. But I went up to the attic, according to plan, to rest out of sight.

Without once touching the bannister, I climbed to the second-floor hallway. When I reached the door to the attic, I stood on one foot and removed a wool sock and covered my hand with it to work the doorknob. Silly, I thought. But just in case.

There was an old divan in a corner of the hot, airless attic. It was a comfort to me, and I drifted effortlessly off to sleep. When I woke, the light had gone from the window. I looked at my wristwatch. Almost nine o'clock!

I crept down the attic stairs to the hallway. The house was quiet, like a tomb. I walked slowly through the bedroom door when I heard water running from the adjoining bathroom. Roger would be shaving. I stepped through French doors to the balcony and waited, my heart pounding. It was only seconds, but it seemed like hours before Roger emerged from the bathroom.

I heard him slapping his cheeks as he walked, like he always did after splashing on cologne. How familiar was the sound of his step as he crossed the bedroom to the armoire and stopped at the image of himself in the mirror. I gave him a second or two to grow rapt at his own reflection.

Then I took the lovely carving knife from my handbag and walked briskly in from the balcony, right up to a very astonished Roger. He was so handsome in his crisp white wing-collared formal shirt and his black silk tie and his black mohair tuxedo trousers. I said, "Happy birthday, dope."

Then, as he stared at my serene and smiling face and tried to think of something to say, I sank the knife into his cummerbund. It felt like I was slicing turkey breast.

Roger fell slowly, like a majestic tree. I'd been gripping the knife so tightly that Roger's body slipped off the blade and then there it was in my hand—wet and red—when Blondie pranced out from the bathroom, wrapped in a towel.

Softly, she inquired, "What the—?"

Before she could say anything further, softly or otherwise, I picked up a heavy music box from the top of a rosewood writing table and advanced on her. I waved the dripping knife as a feint and she flailed

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her hands defensively. Her towel slipped off, and that's when I clubbed her on the forehead with the music box.

She fell to the floor. I clubbed her several more times, until I was certain she was as dead as Roger.

Do you want to know why I'm laughing so?

It's because not only will I get away with this—I won't even be a suspect. The way it will play is that Roger and Blondie had a terrific struggle and did it to each other. Don't you think so?

Oh, but maybe I should leave the weapons in their proper places. The carving knife in Blondie's hand, the music box in Roger's. I do this, and now I'm walking out from the bedroom, through the dark hallway and toward the stairs.

Poor Roger, I think. Poor innocent Blondie. Oh, the hell with them! I laugh.

I laugh again as I start down the stairs. Why is it all dark in the house?

I sense movement in the darkened foyer at the bottom of the stairs. My skin prickles.

A crowd of voices yells as one: "Surprise!"

Lights suddenly go up. There is a mob of happy young people in party hats, and I don't recognize a single one of them. They're all holding champagne glasses.

Festivity now drains from their faces, replaced by confusion. They stare at me, frozen on the stairs with wool socks over my shoes and bits of blood and blonde hair on my wrists and hands.

Somebody throws a champagne glass at me.

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a *NEW* short story by

JOHN F. SUTER

From the chairman of this year's Edgar Allan Poe Awards committee for best short story, a twisty vignette about a clever deception . . .

THE TOUCH OF A VANISHED HAND

by JOHN F. SUTER

"This is the photocopy I received," Porter said, holding the manuscript in his blunt fingers. He laid it on the mahogany chairside table by his right hand. His intense blue eyes looked calmly at Peter Richter across the restored, high-ceilinged Victorian room.

"And here is the original." Richter leaned across the fireplace, extending the pages with a hand all knobs and taut flesh. His face seemed to Porter to be one huge freckle crowned by thinning, unruly straw hair.

Porter held the original script close to the copy. The title pages both read "Strifeless Victory by Emma Porter." He leafed through pages at random and cross-compared.

"They appear to be identical," he said, extending the original to Richter.

"You read the story?" his visitor asked.

"I did."

"What is your opinion?"

Porter rubbed his coarse moustache with his left thumb. "Some questions first. Since Emma is no longer here to tell me, how did you get this?"

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Richter perched on the edge of his leather chair. "As I told you in my letter, I do literary research—"

"Yes." Porter's tone resonated and overcame Richter's nails-on-blackboard, screaky voice.

"In the mid-70s, I was invited to conduct some sessions on my subject at the Seneca Writers Conference. There was a workshop on the short story at the same time."

He warmed as he saw that Porter was giving him complete attention. "At one of my discussions, a very pleasant woman dropped in, although she was not registered. She spoke to me afterward and introduced herself as Emma Porter, attending the story workshop. She had found my talk interesting, she said. I was gratified. I sometimes drift when I talk, and it can be heavy going for an audience."

"But she put you at ease," Porter remarked.

"Yes, she did."

"Did you two talk very often?"

"Just that one time. I might have forgotten her, but George Billings, who did the workshop, wrote to me later, enclosing this manuscript and asking me to confirm a Willa Cather influence he thought he saw in the text."

Porter brought his stocky frame upright in his chair. "Willa Cather? Quite interesting."

Richter waved a jerky hand. "It might have been, but Billings was killed in a plane crash the next week, and the manuscript found its way into limbo until three months ago.

"When I found it among a pile of miscellany, I almost discarded it, but then I thought that the author might want it."

"After all this time," Porter remarked.

Richter's freckles became deeper-hued. "As I said, I felt guilty and thought the author should have her work back.

"Fortunately," he added, "the Seneca people are like pack rats when it comes to records."

"But," said Porter, "we've only had this house four years. Our move must have caused some confusion. Didn't you think it wasn't worth it, after all?"

Richter lifted a hand. "It's the way it is with research. Once started, you can't quit."

Porter looked up at the marble mantel between them. "Seneca Conference? About as far back as those pictures."

Richter's gaze followed Porter's. At each end of the greenish marble mantel stood a color photograph in a brass frame. On the left

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was a picture of a younger, deep-tanned Norman Porter. On the right was the likeness of a laughing-eyed, round-faced woman with thick, greying brown hair.

"Emma Porter," murmured Richter. "Just as she was on the day we talked."

"You wouldn't have known her after the eighteen-wheeler rolled over on her little Mercedes," Porter said heavily.

"I'm sorry that this makes it so difficult for you."

Porter took two minutes before continuing. "The story in the papers read: 'Emma Porter, widely known as best-selling author Irmalin Porterfield, was killed today when . . .' and so on and so on. Is that when you found out who she was? Or did somebody else tell you? Did you get the idea then?"

Richter stammered. "You make it sound like—"

Porter cut him off. "What do you want out of this, *Mr.* Richter?" He held up his copy of the story. "Don't tell me you're offering to give it to me. I won't buy that."

Richter pulled himself together with an effort. "Well, you see, I have expertise in the literary field. I suspect that you haven't, if you'll forgive my saying so. I thought we might help each other."

Porter stared, saying nothing.

Richter went on, "This manuscript is worth more today than it was when she wrote it. Even if Irmalin what's-her-name was selling then, she wasn't as widely known as she is now. I have contacts—"

"She had an agent," Porter cut him off. "His contacts might be better than yours."

Richter rubbed the back of his neck. "Who is her literary executor?"

"I am."

"Did she leave any unfinished manuscripts?"

"Four novels in various stages of progress."

"How will you handle them?" Richter pushed.

"Finish them and sell them, perhaps. Maybe donate them to the university for their files. That's for the future."

"Did you say *finish them,* Mr. Porter?" Richter looked about him. "This is a restored Victorian mansion, isn't it, Mr. Porter? How high is this ceiling?"

"Thirteen feet."

"The mantel, there—faux marble?"

"Genuine, from Italy. I have twelve stained-glass windows, among other things."

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"And you've had it four years. Restoration and furnishings didn't come cheap."

Porter nodded. His mouth twitched at the corners.

Unnoticing, Richter went on. "It must have cost a lot of money, Mr. Porter. But I understand that Irmalin Porterfield *commanded* a lot of money from books, TV rights, screen rights. None of my business, but who paid for all of this—this house and what's in it?"

Porter's smile was grim. "Both of us. First, we got the house for a song. Then—well, let's go back to a little before the Seneca Conference. Our lawyer called us in one day. The IRS was getting tough on joint accounts. On survival, a spouse had to prove, to the last penny, that he or she had contributed equally to a joint account. So he advised us to divide our property down the middle, giving each the same worth. And that is when, so the IRS could not quibble, Irmalin Porterfield's identity was made known to a limited number of persons. It would make her bankable talent clear.

"And," he went on, "I ceded certain of my stocks to her at that time. What we did with our money was each one's own judgment. We always acted in harmony, however."

Richter sat, not commenting.

Porter picked up the photocopy. "Now, this story. It might be hers. She did go to Seneca. She never mentioned this, however. I don't believe it's hers."

Richter stirred. "What makes you say that?"

"Little things I won't discuss unless I have to. Above all, it's just not her voice."

Richter, unable to control himself, lifted his upper lip. "Are you a judge of literature?"

"I've read all of her books, plus the unfinished ones."

"Writers do sometimes produce uncharacteristic work."

"Perhaps. And perhaps you found this old story by someone else altogether, realized what had happened to Emma, and put a new title page on it. It's not handwritten."

Richter tried a conciliatory tone. "I assure you— Look, Mr. Porter, I could take this, do an in-depth analysis, and we'd both benefit from simultaneous publication. Why should you care? You seem to have plenty of money."

Porter stared at him. "Integrity."

Richter fidgeted in his chair. "Integrity? Believe me, in spite of your suspicions, I've not tampered with this. My credentials—"

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Porter leaned forward. "Your credentials stink. As soon as I read this thing, I had a trace run on you. You've been accused of plagiarism in scholarly circles three separate times. Can't you stand on your own feet?"

Richter jumped up, clutching the original of the story.

"I'll get it published in spite of you, Porter. All you are is a money-grubber, sanctimonious in the light from your stained glass. All she meant to you were the dollars earned."

Porter also rose. "Since you paint that portrait, I'll live up to it. You try to do what you talk about, and all of that money will fall on you and squash you like a bug."

Richter rushed to the front door and jerked it open.

"Ram it and jam it!" he shouted.

He tried to slam the door and break the etched glass in it, but Porter, anticipating this, managed to get there in time. He eased the door shut, but let it close with audible firmness.

Porter sighed. He walked slowly back to the living room, opened the drawer in a small writing desk, took an object out, and closed the drawer.

He crossed to the marble mantel and stood by the photograph of the woman.

"Hello, Sis," he said. "Just made a new acquaintance, didn't you?"

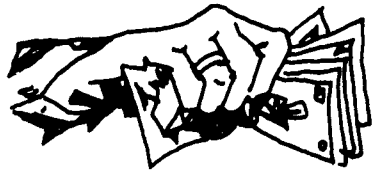
He moved to the center of the mantel and set up the picture he had taken from the drawer. It showed a white-haired woman with high cheekbones and a patrician nose. Her mouth wore a Mona Lisa smile.

"Hello, sweetheart," he said, emotion underlying the words. "I didn't know your spelling had improved so much, years back. But you always managed our money well."

He walked across the room to the steep stair that rose to the second floor. Halfway up, a stained-glass window shed a warm glow on the oriental runner on the treads. At the bottom of the stair, a heavy, gilt-frame mirror hung on the wall.

He looked into the glass.

"Hello, Irmalin Porterfield," he said.



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a *NEW* short story by

JEFFRY SCOTT

A timely tale of a "crime of bias" and a police superintendent determined to bring his man in . . .

MONEY IN THE BANK

by JEFFRY SCOTT

Roy Patel died on the Friday night and before midnight, a certain Alan Scaife was invited to help the police with their enquiries. Scaife was out again next morning, and by Sunday lunchtime he was holding forth about the tragedy in the Fox and Grapes.

"Accidents happen, right?" said Alan Scaife. He was a large if not particularly well-muscled youth who owned ten pairs of jeans, three times as many T-shirts, and was known for changing his clothes several times a day. All the jeans and shirts were white, and had to look pristine. It was a sort of visual pun, a rebus: Scaife's self-chosen nickname was The White Knight.

"Keep it down to a shout, Scaifey," the landlord put in. The White Knight and his followers were tolerated in the Fox and Grapes, providing they stuck to the far end of the public bar and kept their unpleasant opinions to themselves.

Alan Scaife sneered at him but followed the suggestion. Heads went together over the round table, whose surface could hardly be seen for pint glasses of lager. "All I'm saying, maybe somebody got carried away, it happens when you've had a few. Anyway, there's plenty more where Patel came from—that's the trouble."

Henry Morgan, who had been at school with several of the gang and drank with them out of habit, said uneasily, "My mum reckons Patel was a good bloke. That time she was in bed for weeks, Patel sent his old woman round with the med'cine, regular, and never charged any extra."

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Scaife was pitying. "He could afford it. Wake up, mate, any fool knows how our Kenyan-Asian brothers do so well, run all the shops these days. Either the stuff they sell is nicked, or they never pay their bills. On your bike, Henry. Drink up and get lost, we got private business and you're not wanted." Young Morgan wasted no time in leaving.

"Wimp," The White Knight scoffed, before he was quite out of earshot.

Pete Sayers, whose knuckles were skinned, wriggled in his chair. "Is it going to be all right, Scaifey? What did they say when they had you down the nick all that time?"

"You ain't heard the half of it—they pulled me in again yesterday. They had frogmen searching the canal; they found my household implement." The others gaped at him, and sputtering with amusement, Alan Scaife explained, "The machete, you berks. My brief was with me, he said it wasn't no machete, just something you can buy at a hardware store, chop up firewood and that."

He paused, frowning. "Great idea, Pete; chuck it in the canal, wash the fingerprints off even if they do find it. Only they don't wash off, not always. Lucky my brief was one step ahead. That guy would be cheap at twice the price, I'm not kidding. He said the machete would turn up, like as not, so be ready. When the Filth springs it on me, as they think, I turns to my brief and goes, 'There, what did I tell you, Mr. Gilbert? When my firewood-tool got pinched last month, I was dead worried about somebody misusing it.' And he nods and says isn't it fortunate I told you blokes at the time how it had been lifted off my stall down the market. Pig sick, they were."

Scaife gulped down half his latest pint of lager. "They had Ronnie and Little Del in, straight after, and them two backed me up, good as gold. But then they had to . . ." he added meaningly. "Where was we, anyway? What did they say to me?—What could they say? Yeah, I was out around the manor Friday night, with most of you lads. We had a skinful, feeling no pain. No, we never saw Patel, nearest we could ever of been to him was two streets away. The law can think what they think, it's a free country. But they can't touch me."

Cutler had been working for some forty hours, punctuated by a total of perhaps six hours dozing in a chair. Now he was long past weariness. His ears sang whenever the incident room fell quiet; the mirror might show him a lopsided, heavy face with pendulous

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cheeks, but his head felt light as a balloon, ready to float away if he moved too abruptly. He had spent half a minute recently trying to work out why the double-breasted jacket of his suit hung so awkwardly, before understanding that it was done up on the wrong buttons, one side inches lower than the other.

Commander Daitches was saying something with an air of repeating himself, forcing Cutler to concentrate. "Go home before you fall over, Ted. Proper sleep, a clothes-off job. All this will still be here tomorrow."

Cutler nodded soggily. Maybe it was fanciful, a hallucination triggered by tiredness, but the incident room—a conference hall in the basement of the town hall—seemed to reek of defeat and futility. "That poisonous young bastard Scaife did it, you know."

"Get some rest," Daitches ordered, avoiding direct comment. Cutler began fumbling possessions off the desk and into his pockets: pipe, pouch, several boxes of matches, a Swiss army knife. He failed to notice Commander Daitches's departure. Yes, it would all still be there tomorrow. And Roy Patel, thirty years old, father of twin daughters and a baby son, would still be dead.

"Maybe we're going at this the wrong way," Detective-Inspector Keith suggested. Had his nose not been spread all over his face, he might have been described as puckish. "Try a bit of lateral thinking. We'd have cracked Scaife open easier than a tin safe, but for that bloody solicitor of his. Gilbert's no tuppenny-halfpenny brief, he costs. We know Scaife, The White Nightshirt, is a loony who thinks the Ku Klux Klan is soft on ethnic minorities. But if he can afford Gilbert, then Scaife has to be At It as well. Common or garden villainy. We'll never get him for Patel, so let's find out what Scaife is stealing or who he's extorting from and get him put away for that. It's better than nothing," Keith coaxed. It pained him to watch the guv'ner smashing his head against a brick wall.

Cutler grunted amiably enough, setting out his smoker's toys on the desk. He felt better for a few hours between the sheets, and this morning's shower, the fresh clothes. He did not feel a new man, but only on account of feeling like an old one, even on good days.

"Did you get that lipstick back from Forensic, like I asked?"

Pulling a face, Keith observed, "You're supposed to say, 'Thanks for the input, Victor, that's a very ingenious notion.' " He caught a passing woman constable by the sleeve, murmured briefly, and within a minute she returned with a gilt cylinder in a clear plastic

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shroud. "Partial thumbprint on the case, the dead man's," the inspector reported. "Which confirms what Patel's assistant told us. Just before closing the pharmacy, Patel took a new lipstick from the display and said it was a special shade that suited his wife. She'd been asking him for it all week, and he kept forgetting."

Cutler grunted again, scrabbling at the bag. "I woke up with the daftest idea, Vic. Call it copper's instinct. If I was a real clever fellow, this lipstick would tell me something important."

Inspector Keith twitched the thing out of his clumsy fingers. "You'll break it, bodging it that way. There's no top to pull off, just twist it and—"

Recapturing the cylinder, Cutler brought it close to his bloodshot eyes. "I thought so. What d'you make of this?"

"It cost a bit, even at trade price, so Patel was ready to lash out on his wife. Horrible color, must come out brown."

"Brand new—but used. When my wife gets a new lipstick out, it always puts me in mind of a rifle cartridge. But look here, the tip isn't perfectly round any more. There's a flat on it. Worn away slightly, see, at an angle. Not a bullet now, more . . . like a chisel shape. So what d'you make of it?"

"Oh yes," said Keith, taking the unspoken thrust of Cutler's musing. "Patel used this to write with—lipstick makes a pretty good grease-pencil. Why and what he wrote, we'll never know. It *is* weird. He had a perfectly good ball-pen and a felt-tip in his top pocket. I tried 'em, they work."

Lower lip protruding, Cutler mumbled, "Never is a word gets right up my nose, Vic. Why won't we ever know?"

"Look, Fred Edgar is the best scene-of-crime officer you'll get, and he found nothing in the way of messages, graffiti, whatever, anywhere near Patel's body. Our lads double-checked, too. If Patel did scrawl something on a wall, f'rinstance, Scaife just wiped it off afterward. Face it, Scaife is an animal and a head-case, but he isn't stupid."

Inspector Keith, unusually, was scowling as he spoke. "Guys do strange stuff under pressure. Patel knew he had a potential lynch mob after him. We've got enough witnesses to him trying to stay ahead of a gang of rowdies that night. Aplett Street, Corder Road, and the last sighting was that motorist who saw him in Peter Street itself. Patel could tell he was in for a bloody good hiding, at best. He panicked, no blame to him. Maybe he started fiddling with that lipstick, in his pocket." Keith snapped his fingers. "Better get back

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to Forensics, ask for a double-check on his pocket linings, might be lipstick traces there, which would clear things up. It's bugging you, right?"

Cutler wasn't listening. "The famous witnesses," he said drearily. "They have Patel down to a T—Asian, short, slightly built, fawn raincoat, and he limped. But the others—just a gang of yobs, maybe four, maybe seven. Nobody knows nuffin'. Lovely people, round these parts."

Keith countered, "It was dark, coming on to rain. Civilians are never observant, and these were rushing to get home before it poured. Most of them knew Patel by sight, anyway, so of course they described him. More witnesses came forward than usual, as a matter of fact. Yeah, plenty of 'em probably agree with Scaife's line of garbage—but they don't hold with murdering a harmless little chap with a club foot just because his skin's a different color. They don't place Scaife in the pack following Patel, or identify anyone with him, for a good reason. They can't, is why. They saw a set of hooligans ready for bother, so they broke eye-contact and got out of the way, sharpish."

Cutler grunted again, dubiously. "We haven't got anywhere, Vic. We can put Scaife in the vicinity at the crucial time. There's the machete, for what it's worth. Which is not nearly enough. Hell and damnation, what a way for me to go out! Stuffed by a toe-rag racist thug and his smart lawyer."

This isn't personal, Inspector Keith commented silently, *perish the thought.* He was sorry for Cutler, in a half-irritated way. All the dinosaurs were the same, they hated to retire on an unclosed case. For Cutler it was worse; the old man took it as an affront when human beings persisted in evil. Nothing to do with law-breaking, he got on well with several villains. But the likes of The White Knight enraged him.

Sharing gloomy silence, they stared out at the incident room. With its trestle tables serving as desks, the space was something like a street market and several of the young detectives in their flashy leather jackets or T-shirts, long hair and designer stubble, could have passed as barrow-boys. A couple of these costermongers were talking to a member of the public who had just entered. Keith smiled to himself: the man wore a three-piece suit and an appalled expression. Some busybody who had expected grim dedication and blundered in on casual activity. Somebody was whistling cheerfully, a woman police constable was brooding over a fax machine, abstract-

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edly shredding a foam cup, somebody else sat on a table, legs swinging, phone pinched between chin and hunched shoulder.

Detective-Constable Sweet brought the stranger over to Cutler and Keith. Sweet was a likely young copper, valued for deceptive looks as much as ability—sallow, squinting, the sort of person who seems up to no good in a church choir, let alone on the street. Keith chuckled. "Whoever this punter is, he thinks Sweety might mug him on the way out."

DC Sweet announced, "This is Mr. Beadle, guv, works at the Peter Street bank. Won't tell me what he wants." And he sloped off.

"I'm the manager of the Home Counties Bank, Peter Street branch," Beadle corrected. He was a middle-aged young man who obviously cared about status. "Well, acting manager while Mr. Smith's on holiday."

"Does you credit, son," Inspector Keith observed, but under his breath. And aloud, "What's on your mind, sir?"

Beadle blinked rapidly, nonplussed by the colloquial style. Then he remembered his script. "I saw it the minute I cleared the machine. The name jumped out at me, after all the publicity. So I brought it straight to you." He opened a slim briefcase fit for summit conferences—promotion present from his wife, Keith intuited—and produced a plastic bag designed to hold ten pounds worth of fifty-pence pieces. He laid it on the desk before Cutler.

"Mr. Patel's credit card," Beadle said needlessly. The bag was transparent; they could see what was inside. "It was in the machine," he repeated and then, evidently disappointed by their slowness, "His *credit* card."

"Yes," Cutler agreed. So what? was the sub-text signalled by his face.

Mr. Beadle said, "Turn it over."

Cutler did so. He and Keith nearly banged heads, leaning closer to peer at it. The back of the card was covered in slightly smudged, yet perfectly legible, writing in block capitals. When they hadn't moved for a long while, Beadle asked nervously, "It *is* important, isn't it?"

The policemen looked at each other. "Yes," Cutler replied at last. "I think we can say it's important." Beadle gasped as his hand was grasped and wrung. "You're a bloody good chap." Cutler smiled sheepishly, releasing Beadle. "Thank you, sir, is what I'm driving at. Thank you very much."

* * *

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Gilbert was an imposing figure. Had he not been a lawyer, he could have made a good living as an actor, playing diplomats, surgeons, heads of state. His silver hair and sculpted beard glittered under the strip-lighting in the corridor of Iremonger Row police station. "I'm here to see my client, Superintendent. I hope nobody's been asking him questions yet."

"Wouldn't dream of starting without you, Mr. Gilbert." Cutler stood aside, opening the door of the interview room. Then he closed it again. "A word with you, beforehand. I'm well aware of your reputation . . ."

Gilbert's nostrils flared and his eyes narrowed. "I've been abused by better men than you. I just do my job, within the law."

"I don't know what you're talking about, sir. I meant that you're not exactly famous for backing losers." Cutler guffawed brutally. "Well, plenty of losers, but you make your money by giving them good advice, before they get clobbered."

"While we're off the record, Superintendent—don't risk leaving under a cloud, when retirement is so near. Alan Scaife has accounted for himself on two previous occasions recently. Now you are subjecting my client to a third boiling of stale cabbage. Anyone less understanding than myself might suspect you of harassment. Frankly, you reveal personal animosity to Mr. Scaife whenever you talk to him. I've made careful notes of examples of this bias—vendetta might not be too strong a term."

"Your client," Inspector Keith said pleasantly, "is a racist, a bully, and a born liar. What's not to like about such a prince?"

"That's exactly what I was talking about. Thank you, Mr. Keith, I shall add that little epigram to my collection. A touch of humor often goes down well in those boring complaints to the Chief Commissioner."

"Let's all cool down." Cutler, not only cool but bland, ushered the solicitor into another room, across the corridor from the one where The White Knight was waiting. "We want to mark your card for you, Mr. Gilbert. Give you the starting-price."

The solicitor shrugged pettishly, but there was a curious glint in his eyes. Keith and Cutler sat at the plastic-topped table; Gilbert, head tilted superciliously, leaned against the wall, facing them.

Cutler beamed at him. "Ground rules," he started briskly. "Nothing up my sleeve, nothing done with mirrors. Everything I'm about to say is kosher; you will hear nothing we cannot prove at the trial. Vic?"

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Keith answered the cue. "Roy Patel was followed for some fifteen minutes and about half a mile the night he died by a gang of hooligans subjecting him to threats and racist abuse. As you know, the deceased was lame, had no chance of outrunning them. His only hope was for a police officer to come along; sadly, none did. If Mr. Patel had tried to phone for help, the gang would have attacked him that much quicker.

"Evidently he decided, rightly as it turned out, that he might be in no position to name his attackers after they got sick of tormenting him and went into action. So he worked out what amounted to a dying deposition."

Cutler said, "The more I learn about Roy Patel, the more I admire him. He was in mortal fear, Mr. Gilbert, but he kept his head. You're an intelligent chap. How would you tackle a challenge like that? You're alone, helpless, the wolves are at your heels. You want to tell the world who they are, leaving that information where it will be out of their reach, but bound to be found. How would you go about that?"

Gilbert folded his arms the other way. "I'm sure you will tell me."

Cutler nodded heavily. "Mr. Patel named the ringleader and lodged the information where it was safe as . . . oh, money in the bank.

"Funnily enough, he was seen outside the bank in Peter Street on Friday night. Our witness says Mr. Patel was recognizable because he was standing in the light, by the bank's money machine, the hole in the wall. This witness was driving past, and though he noticed a group of men milling about on the other side of the road, he thought nothing of it. Of course, that was the lynch mob, waiting for Peter Street to be free of traffic—it's not very busy after dark—before they got on with hacking and kicking somebody to death.

"This is what Mr. Patel did: he got out his credit card. Ink, ballpoint, or felt-tip won't take on that shiny surface. You need a grease-pencil. He had a lipstick, that would do. He wrote his message and put the card in the machine. Credit card, remember, not cash card; very few bank machines issue cash on a credit card. In any case, he would have keyed in the wrong number, deliberately. After his third try, the machine retained the card. That's the system. The bank tells us it's a fairly frequent occurrence. Customers get their number wrong but keep trying, or they use the right number and wrong card. Either way, that card stays in the machine until a member of staff clears it. Mr. Patel left his message on Friday night, and this

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morning, first day of business after the weekend, it was found in the machine's reject tray."

Inspector Keith opened a folder and set a photocopied document on the table. Gilbert, no longer elegantly bored, crossed the space in a stride and peered at the paper. It was an enlargement of a Home Counties Bank credit card, front and back. Keith said, "Spelling's off, and it's a bit terse, but Mr. Patel was in a hurry and the card is small."

Mr. Gilbert produced gold-rimmed bifocals from his top pocket. Cutler, heavy lips curling, believed that the solicitor had taken in the message at a glance and was stalling while he thought.

The printed message, the color of dried blood, ran: "A. SCAFF (WHITE KT) SAYS HE WILL KILL ME. I FEAR FOR LIFE. THEY ARE CRAZY. SCAFF AND 4 MORE. ROY PATEL"

Gilbert removed the glasses, stowed them in a crocodile-skin sheath, and slid the sheath back into his pocket. "An incoherent, ambiguous bit of scribble, that's all."

"One way of looking at it," Cutler conceded. "The machine timed the confiscation of that card at 8:46 P.M. last Friday. Mr. Patel was found by a group of nurses soon afterwards. They'd stopped their car to withdraw money. They heard shouts, laughter, the sounds of a gang running away along Peter Street. One girl phoned for an ambulance while the others tended a terribly injured man. Her call was logged at 8:50 and the ambulance's arrival was logged at 9:00 P.M., by which time Patel was dead.

"I don't find this written accusation incoherent. It seems very plain to me. And it was posted, as one might say, just minutes before Mr. Patel died."

Making to don the bifocals again, the solicitor thought better of it. He smiled charmingly. "Talk to me, Superintendent."

"Your client will be charged, no question. 'Four more,' it says on the card. They will sweat when Scaife doesn't walk out of here. I dare say they have been sweating all along, truth be told. First they sweat and then they wriggle, Mr. Gilbert. You know how it works; I'm preaching to the converted. About nine hours from now—some of 'em are no good at getting up in the morning—at least three of those four will be begging to make statements."

Gilbert either smiled or grimaced. "It's . . . not an unlikely scenario, I suppose."

"You suppose bloody right." Cutler rose, put the facsimile of Roy Patel's last message back into the folder, and patted it. "So I shall

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be told about Peter Street last Friday night—three times over. Unless it's four. But three, most likely. There's generally one really dim feller, thinks if he shuts up and keeps his head down, nobody will notice him. Bad mistake, more often than not: the mouthy ones put it all on him. This time, they won't need to. We were drunk, they'll say, Scaifey led us astray. We thought it was all down to laughs and giggles, rough the guy up a bit. But The White Knight went berserk with that machete . . ."

"You forgot the best part." Inspector Keith was reproachful. "How they were so drunk and out of it, Scaife did the business before they could stop him."

"All right, you've made your point. I want—I would appreciate it, and it might benefit all parties, if I had a quarter of an hour alone with my client." From Gilbert, it was a grovelling plea.

He was at the door when Cutler, dislike naked after being in check for so long, called after him, "You can have two minutes, and the clock is running. No coaching, no nonsense, just tell Scaife it's over and he is going down. Move!"

Cutler's wife groaned. "What time is it?"

"Sorry, luv. I tiptoe in like a burglar, and you still wake up. It's late . . . you know, early. Birds singing, must be sixish." His snoring seemed to start the moment he stopped speaking. He was talking in his sleep, the words a slur, when she got up. But as she left the bedroom to make the first cup of tea of the day, Cutler snorted, rolled over, and spoke clearly and quite loudly.

His wife was pleased by what she heard. He had to be coming to terms with retirement instead of resenting it. Because he had just exclaimed, with great satisfaction, "Money in the bank!"

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Morris Hershman has written dozens of stories and novels in several different genres. He furnished a story for the EQMM anthology Prime Crimes 5 *in 1987, but takes his first bow for the magazine with "Cloud of Smoke". . .*

CLOUD OF SMOKE

by MORRIS HERSHMAN

Chad Gainer reached J.F.K. Airport early in the afternoon. A respectable-looking rented black Impala took him along New York City's West End Expressway, which seemed under repair for most of his route. In the Bronx, at last, he drove gingerly through one street after another with tenements that seemed to have been gutted in a blaze of wartime ferocity.

At the Kingsbridge Avenue Veterans Hospital, he had to wait for a signed pass before making his first visit. A wheezing elevator in need of minor surgery itself took him up to his floor. He stood aside before getting off so that he could let three nurses and a bed patient come on board. The patient, an old man—impossible to look at anyone in an overused dark hospital gown and not wonder which war had put him at the money-strapped V.A.'s tender mercies—was joking clumsily with the nurses, wanting his manner to make it clear that he wasn't a bit worried. But his hollow cheeks looked papery under their sunburn, and the moist green eyes were half shut with anticipated pain.

Chad's pass admitted him into a barn of a room with seven patients in different stages of discomfort and an eighth bed unmade but empty. The man lying farthest from the door, with a day's beard and a network of wrinkles on a thin face, looked up warily as Chad came closer. Unsure if the newcomer was a doctor or a bureaucrat, he seemed determined to give no information except his name, rank, and serial number, sir.

"So what if your father was named Maurice Gainer?" the older man asked explosively after only twenty seconds of tight-jawed lis-

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tening. "Why should that cut any ice with me? I don't know nothing about a Maurice Gainer."

Chad showed him the faded sepia photograph that he had carried in every wallet for years. Maurice Gainer was seen in a World War II army infantry uniform, smiling diffidently into the sun on a summer afternoon in Sicily, his high-cheekboned face without a line, eyes clear, rigid posture adopted with unforced ease. The image of a young man, which the old and middle-aged could look at and tell themselves quietly that they might not be perfectly happy but they had certainly outlived that boy. They couldn't stride over the earth the way he must have done, but at least they could lumber across and that perfectly healthy-looking young man couldn't do a thing.

"My father was killed later that same day," Chad said softly. "I never was in the same room with him."

"Well, you've got his face for sure." Former Sergeant Victor Kyle pointed disdainfully at the dead man's caterpillar eyebrows, making it clear that his revived memories of Maurice Gainer were completely unfavorable. "You're older than he was on his last day, but you were raised without a real father, not even a father like Gainer would've been. But hell, everybody carries a load of grief. I've buried two wives and my only kid. What has your grief got to do with me?"

"I'm here because a particular letter was mailed to me a couple of weeks ago and it just arrived. The guy who wrote it, Michael Mielnik, soldiered with my father the same as you did."

"Corporal Mielnik was staying here, but last week he left for good." At Victor Kyle's age, other people left for good or passed away or caught it or bought it. After that, they turned into absent friends. Nobody died. "You can't talk to him. Guaranteed."

"Mielnik wrote because he had seen my picture in the paper." It wouldn't generate admiration to put in that the pompous executive portrait had appeared in the Business Day section of the *New York Times*. "He had known my father and saw the resemblance. He didn't have the strength to write too much, but he said that you and an officer were on the scene and saw it and talked to him about it separately later on."

"I'm surprised Mielnik could get his head together long enough to write anything. By those last weeks he must've been on a dozen different drugs—for medical reasons only, of course."

"Will you tell me how it happened to him, to my father?"

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"I didn't really see a hell of a lot. The unit was under counter-attack from Fritz. Grenades were landing all around. I did see a medic's aid bending over what was left of Gainer, but I looked away right off to find out what the other GIs were up to." No sympathy in those tones, none for Chad and even less, if possible, for his father. "That's just about the whole mother-naked truth, and it's worth what my uncle used to call two cents in Chinese money."

"Did you see anybody talking to my father just before the end? Mielnik wrote that you and the officer told him separately there was someone."

"I don't remember after all this time. Truth to tell you, the less I remember about your father, the better I feel. You're making a nuisance of yourself and I can't walk away, but I'll tell you the rest of the story and make you wish you'd never come. Maurice Gainer was always—and I mean always—talking about giving himself a million-dollar wound so he'd be sent to a rear hospital or back home and not have to do his share of the fighting. When I saw him dead, I remember thinking that some Nazi bastard had made sure Gainer wouldn't get his million-dollar wound after all, and to hell with both of 'em."

In spite of the furious hammering in Chad's ears, he didn't look away.

"Suppose somebody did talk to Gainer and I could remember who it was? If that guy is still alive to remember, why would he remember it? He might've talked to a dozen GIs who kicked off that same day. Talking to Maurice Gainer at all would be the opposite of special, except to somebody in his family who never knew him."

Chad turned to go.

"And it happened more than fifty years ago. It's history. Stupid kids learn about the war in school and laugh because we didn't have jet planes or whatever, and the movies show Hitler in black and white and not in color like 'real' documentaries. It's a statistic now. It sure don't matter what happened to one cowardly GI."

Oh yes, it does! But aren't you glad to be saying the exact opposite? Signs of life only come into you when you insist something is hopeless. Despair and even casual cruelty are mother's milk to you.

Passing another eight-bed room on his way to the elevator, Chad saw an old woman bent over the nearest occupied bed. She spoke swiftly, apparently addressing the unconscious man in front of her.

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"You fight your way through everything else in life, Westwood, but you don't fight and holler your way through this, Westwood. Not this."

Chad walked off more slowly, no longer wanting to run. Talking to somebody whose only feeling was bitterness had almost made him sick, but now he had overheard a foreign-born old woman speak haltingly with respect for another and with resignation over what had to come, a reminder that different lives had been happier and more fulfilling.

Way to go, as Chad's older son still liked to say, but not in that exact sense. Way to go, indeed!

"I remember your father and Corporal Mielnik, both," said former Lieutenant Oliver Barclay after Chad had introduced himself and talked briefly. "Why did Mielnik write to you about me?"

Barclay was a tall, tanned man with the ease of manner that came to somebody who was contentedly retired. He had just come back from a golf game and was straining to switch his attention to a talk about some stranger's business. His daughter, whose figure remained shapely in her middle years, hurried back and forth with drinks. It was she who had agreed to the appointment when Chad phoned, and a twenty-minute drive past Yonkers had brought him out to that well-fixed person's suburban playtoy of a town called Harrison.

Chad explained what Mielnik's letter had said. Barclay refreshed his palate with a sip of vodka and refreshed his memory of Maurice Gainer with a look at Chad's durable sepia photograph, taking notice of its condition and the care with which it was treated.

"I'm sure I saw your father just before and just after he died. I'll be glad to tell you whatever I remember, of course."

"Thank you." *Sir*. The title hovered on Chad's lips, impelled there by comparisons between his reception by this former officer and by Victor Kyle back in the depths of Kingsbridge Avenue.

"Maurice Gainer was the sort of guy who made people of my generation say with pleasure that he had been well raised. He was courteous, and those good manners seemed like second nature to him, they were so unobtrusive."

"Are you saying that my father was liked and admired by the others after all? That he had a lot of friends?"

"I suppose he had some friends." But the sing-song detachedness of Barclay's words disappeared when it became clear that the

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younger man wasn't accepting mechanical consolations. "To be blunt, which you seem to prefer, he could also get on other guys' nerves. It's absolutely true what Mielnik wrote about your father's obsession with giving himself a million-dollar wound and not being disabled for life."

"Didn't a lot of soldiers feel the same way?"

"Maurice Gainer was much too verbal. He would waylay men he hardly knew and apologize for the interruption, then ask their opinions about how it might be done with long-term safety. He once stopped me on leave when I was taking a girl up to what was left of a movie theater."

One of Chad's early psychotherapists back in Chicago had liked to say, "I accept that" when Chad made some remark that chimed in entirely with the man's knowledge of his character. Chad stopped himself from using those same arrogantly chosen words.

"Mr. Barclay, what can you remember about my father's last day?"

"I've been thinking that out. We lost Gainer in Sicily, of course. I was in a miserable mood almost every day, and not just for the obvious reasons. I used to wake up cursing. We were bivouacked on different farms as we moved along, and the animals kept me from a night's sleep. No matter what you've been told, I'm here to tell you that ducks and calves and turkeys and peacocks, all of them, say nothing day or night except *hoo-ha, hoo-ha!* I've never cared doodley-squat for any of them ever since."

It was no surprise to hear that the prudish Barclay had adopted at least one picturesquely profane expression to prove that in spite of wealth and position, he remained one of the boys, a boy of the people.

"My father died outside Troina," Chad said softly. "I've been there. It's on a hilltop—"

"I remember Troina, all right." As he fell to musing, his daughter freshened Chad's Irish whiskey and glided out with only a hint of coquetry in her backward glance. "Troina, yes. Our artillery was laid in at a distance less than six hundred yards. We had set up in an irregular square. Our pit was more than the usual three feet deep and men kept losing their balance and cussing up a storm. Black cans of powder charges were placed in groups of three on one side and on the other was a row of dirty-looking shells. There was dirt wherever you turned, and in spite of the firing you could smell an underlayer of peaches from a nearby orchard. I've hated peaches

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ever since, as much as I can't stand farm animals."

Barclay winced. He had survived war and gained wealth but never got over the remembered discomfort, the dignity ruffled. Deaths of men he had known wouldn't have been nearly so upsetting as having had to spend days in a row without a change of underwear. He had the emotional make-up of a man who would ordinarily be considered a buffoon, but he didn't inspire laughter.

Chad prodded gently, using the same techniques that served him in such good stead during negotiations with labor union leaders. "On the day my father died you must have been in action."

"Certainly. I myself was at my executive post, which was by no means out of danger." Those last words in italics, for emphasis. "Only a few yards from the battery, just about in the thick of it."

"You saw what happened."

"I'd have seen more, but there was smoke rising up into the shape of a corkscrew, and filthy black puffs charged at us from the air after we fired and before, too. I was hardly seeing much more than my hand in front of my face for most of the time."

Then what kind of a witness was it who couldn't tell what had been going on?

"It happened to my father late in the afternoon, according to the letter."

"Not long after an ammo truck came plowing through the field, yes. There was the usual follow-up argument about whether the driver should help carry shells into the pit. Just about as usual, the gun crew lost and had to do all the scut work."

"So my father was carrying shells."

"I noticed him when some of the smoke cleared briefly. He must've become distracted, either by an enemy grenade or shell or, more likely, the unusual depth of the pit, as I mentioned before. All I know is that he bumped against a shoulder-high sandbag and briefly lost his balance. Next time I looked in his direction, he was limping slightly as he walked but the shells were in place. Then he was facing somebody and I suppose they were talking."

"With all that noise, they could talk?"

"Well, they shouted at each other." He winced in distaste for crudeness. "Men were so jumpy that they'd shout across the gun pit even if there was no action."

"Considering how hard it was to see anything, I'm surprised you could pick out my father."

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"Gainer kept easing his weight off one foot, having had the slight injury. He rested one foot on one of the poles that the dingy camouflage net was strung across. Besides, he was taller than the other guy, and his face was toward me."

"Good enough."

"I'm sure that talk didn't take long. The other guy had his own work to do. I had seen him arrive in the ammo truck as a passenger and run out to get busy. It was his job to give first aid, if possible, before a wounded man could be taken to the rear. He was a medic's aid."

And now, almost by accident, it was sickeningly easy to imagine what might very well have taken place. Father having hurt himself in a painful accident, his mind swerved to the possibility of inflicting a lifesaver wound on himself and he talked urgently to the nearest medic's aid about how to do it without long-term damage.

"Did you see my father fall?"

"No. I looked away and when I turned back the medic's aid was busy somewhere else and your father was on the ground where both men had been standing. I didn't have time to investigate, but I know I wondered about it because there had been no enemy action in that area."

Wasn't that exactly what Chad had dreaded finding out? Father had wounded himself, fallen, and been in place moments later when a German grenade landed, finishing his life as well as his war.

That was the likely conclusion, almost certainly the right one. But it remained circumstantial evidence, and he couldn't know it for a copper-riveted fact. He had to talk to that medic's aid if at all possible, hear it from the one man who knew best of all whether or not father had wounded himself, had died because he was a fool as well as a coward.

"Who was the soldier my father talked to just before he died, the medic's aid, I mean?"

"Just one more GI. The only other thing I can remember about him, if you put me to the test, is that he was one of those who had met a local girl and was determined to marry her right away. He swore he'd have no part of the army's waiting period and he'd be a bridegroom before he left Sicily. A blow-top, if you know what I mean. He'd probably have got into a fist fight with a five-star general at the drop of a hat."

"But you don't know his name."

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"Believe it or not, his nickname is on the tip of my tongue. It was an obvious name and a hundred percent right for him. Everybody called him—oh, damn!"

That was when Chad surprised himself by automatically speaking the nickname.

And wasn't at all surprised in turn to see Barclay's suntanned features grow animated in recognition and agreement.

The patient he had come back to see was still at Kingsbridge Veterans Hospital deep in the Bronx. A portable curtain had been placed temporarily around his bed. Chad waited outside the room for the sound of the curtain being wheeled away. A doctor and nurse came out of the room, the nurse looking sad and reflective while the businesslike doctor hurried off to another patient who might be doing better, whose condition wasn't a rebuke to the curative powers of medical science.

This patient was conscious, a gaunt man with thinning and once-vibrant auburn hair which Chad had noticed earlier. His body would never again be muscular, let alone dependable. Those weak and watery eyes confirmed every sad truth about his condition.

"They finally let me know I can smoke," the patient said hoarsely, with a sour chuckle. He raised himself, too preoccupied to fluff up the pillows at his back for extra comfort. "Reach into that top drawer for the fixings, will you, pal?"

He was staring as Chad handed over the six-colored cigarette package with matches.

"Know you, don't I?"

"You knew my father, and I've been told that I resemble him."

His lips pursed at the sight of Chad's invaluable sepia photograph.

"That's Gainer, the damn fool with his million-dollar wound and those college boy manners! I remember him, all right! I should remember him!"

Red Westwood—what else could he have for a nickname?—closed a fist on a suddenly shaky hand, reminding Chad of what he'd accidentally overheard the man's foreign-born wife saying a little earlier in the afternoon. Westwood yelled and struggled and fought through most of his life. A hard case. Not even the death of somebody he detested was enough to earn his forgiveness.

"Why did you come to see me?"

"You were the last person who talked to him." The vibrant red hair of this man's youth must have been noticed by Lieutenant

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Barclay in spite of the murk of that wartime engagement. Looking at Westwood's underweight body under a quilt, Chad was sure that he'd be shorter than most United States soldiers. Perfect casting for the part of medic's aid in front of Troina. "I'm hoping you can tell me what my father said to you just before he died."

Red Westwood didn't answer, busily smoking without coughing. Was it possible that a flame-tempered man like this, dying, was making believe he hadn't heard so he wouldn't need to answer? Did a man like Westwood, when on his deathbed, decide to spare Maurice Gainer's innocent son?

Chad didn't want to be spared. Conditioned to bad news, he wasn't willing to accept any soft-pedaling of events in the shameful past. He could certainly have turned away and gone back to that contented family life he led back home in Skokie, but he stayed in place. It was necessary to have every *i* firmly dotted, every *t* unmistakably crossed, to rub his nose even deeper into the filth.

"Gainer didn't say much." Red Westwood looked up weakly at his immovable visitor. "He didn't do a damn thing."

"My father was flat on the earth before an enemy grenade landed next to him. How could that have happened if he didn't hurt himself?"

"Easy enough." Westwood drew on his cigarette and went into a furious spasm of coughing. "After all this time, and when I realize what's going to happen soon enough, it don't make no difference if I talk. Nobody's going to get racked up on account of it, especially not me."

Chad waited, hands taut in his jacket side pockets.

Another quick puff, another series of coughs, and then a sad smile. "Come to think of it, did you ever hear that it's hard to keep a secret, that you want to go over to the first guy on the street or go to the first police station and tell the truth? It's a lot of crap, every word. Keeping something secret is the easiest thing in the world, believe me."

Tension was making Chad's voice almost as hoarse as Red Westwood's. "What—what happened?"

"I ought to tell you first, in case you don't know, that I was a medic's aid. Gainer kept hunting me up to ask how he could fix himself a million-dollar wound and not get hurt for life. He hunted me out on leaves, too, when I was with Livia, including her in the talk as if she understood everything, smiling at her, apologizing

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over and over for the interruption, but not stopping. I thought he did almost everything except jump at her."

Maurice Gainer had been a courteous man who never treated women as if they were so much furniture, but politely and warmly. Chad's mother, dead these five years, had often said so.

"I knew I was going to marry Livia as soon as possible. I didn't care if GIs said that Sicilian women have got retractable nails, like cats. I did marry her, by the way. Been together ever since, no thanks to my temper. Or hers, if you care."

This man's commitment to a foreign-born woman had been mentioned by Oliver Barclay, Chad remembered, and his fiery temper, too.

"The day after I was so sure he'd been coming on strong to my Livia, I hopped out to the front on an ammo truck. I wanted to give him hell and make sure he never even looked at my Livvy again, let alone talked to her. I come in sight, and he raises a hand like he's welcoming a friend, and I run over to him. I still remember just about yelling, 'So you want a million-dollar wound! Well, here it is.' I pulled out a knife I carried on my special belt as part of my job, and I cut a hole in him."

Which was why Maurice Gainer had fallen before the next enemy action.

"I knew I could say he'd keeled over in front of me if anybody asked, but no doc was doing autopsies out there. A German grenade came close to him a minute later, so I didn't have to worry."

And it wasn't selfishness or fear that had caused his father's death. Maurice Gainer's behaving like a gentleman, his previous display of good manners, of ordinary decency, had led directly to his murder by another soldier in the same uniform on a battlefield.

"It makes no difference now." Red Westwood shrugged, making his gaunt features crumple in pain. "One GI got killed among thousands and thousands of others, and it was more than fifty years ago besides. Nobody gives a rat's ass now."

Would it make any difference to say very simply and quietly that somebody did care?

He walked out as Westwood coughed rackingly again. While he waited for the elevator, he took out his father's picture, talking to Maurice Gainer without a word spoken out loud: *It was me who cleared your name, Dad, for the sake of Mother's memory and my sister and our good children as well as myself. Late in the day though it is, I'm the one who has made sure that the younger generation will*

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know that no matter what you may have said or thought, nothing that you did was dishonorable. They will feel a little closer to the grandfather they didn't know, as your children will for the same reason.

The young soldier's thick brows remained drawn down as he blinked forever into the Sicilian sun. In spite of Chad Gainer's middle age and the success and happiness he had known with wide experience, he found himself looking at the face in a different way from before. He must have been waiting to hear a gruffly spoken word of thanks, to see an approving smile or a nod of appreciation for a painful job well done.

By the time the hospital elevator doors parted for him, he had realized again—temporarily, as always—that no matter what he accomplished, nothing of that sort was ever going to happen.

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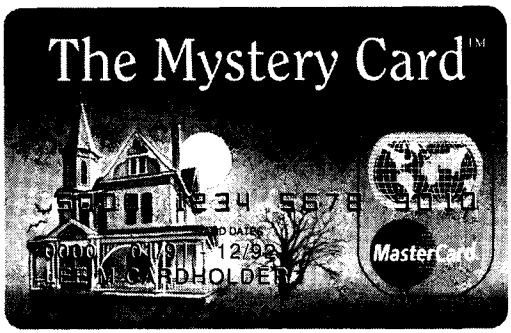

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Born in Fukuoka City, Japan, Jiro Akagawa went to work in an office immediately after his graduation from high school, but he had been writing from an early age and finally made his fiction debut in 1976 when he won the fifteenth All-Yomimono Award for his novel The Ghost Train. *The main characters in that novel—an unimpressive bachelor detective and a beautiful female university student—were so popular that the author brought them back for a very successful series.*

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BEAT YOUR NEIGHBOR OUT OF DOORS

by JIRO AKAGAWA

—MONDAY—

"That's my seat!"

Kyosuke looked up in surprise.

"I beg your pardon . . ."

"I said that's my seat!"

The man was well over sixty, grey and wrinkled. His skin was dry and his sunken eyes threatened to burst out of their sockets with rage.

"What do you mean, 'your seat'?" Kyosuke replied, looking around the carriage. "There are any number of other empty seats."

Although the train was only comprised of two carriages, there were very few other passengers, but despite the fact that Kyosuke was only stating the obvious, the old man became even madder.

"This is my seat!" he shouted. "I always sit here!"

The old man was shaking with rage, and realizing that it would be pointless to antagonize him any further, Kyosuke shrugged and

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stood up. He sat down again in a nearby seat, but the old man, far from thanking him, commented in a loud voice for everyone to hear:

"I don't know what's become of young people these days, they've got no respect for their elders. They're just a bunch of ill-mannered, selfish loafers . . ."

Kyosuke decided to ignore the old man's tirade and looked around the carriage. There were eight other passengers altogether. Five had got on at the last station with him; they were his new neighbors.

Kyosuke Ikegami had spent the weekend moving into his new house and today was the first day he would be commuting from there to his office. He had been determined to buy a house of his own by the time he was thirty, but his wages weren't very high and his company, being comparatively small, could not offer its employees cheap mortgages. He had managed it at last, however. Even though he had had to borrow a lot of money, he had bought his first home.

It took him one hour and fifty minutes to get to the office, three times as long as it did from his previous apartment, and this meant getting up at six o'clock in the morning. The expresses did not stop at the local station; there were not even any staff there, so the train would just pull in unannounced and leave again without any warning. It was a fifteen minute walk to the station from his house along a road surrounded by woods and fields all the way, with not a single building to break the monotony.

A large real-estate company had planned to develop the area but it had gone bankrupt soon after it started and all that remained to show of its plans were six houses, huddled together in a vast expanse of nothing. The shopping centers and restaurants which had been in the original plans had all come to nothing and the isolated houses had to rely on propane gas. It was a twenty minute walk to the nearest shops.

Despite all this, Kyosuke had chosen to move here. He only had three months before the lease on his apartment expired and the house was the best he could afford.

Even though he had been forced by circumstances to move to this house, he was more than satisfied with it and felt like shouting to the world, "This is my house! I have bought my very own home!"

The train had to wait fifteen minutes for an express to pass. While he was sitting there, Kyosuke could not help but think it a coincidence that the occupants of all six houses should just happen to catch the same train every morning. However, when he thought

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about it, he realized that it was only natural. There was not another train for more than thirty minutes, so even if they all arrived at work a little early, they were sure to be late if they waited for the next train.

Kyosuke thought that he should introduce himself to his neighbors. He had been so busy with the move that he had not had a chance over the weekend, and although he had seen them all set off for the station that morning, they seemed to be avoiding him and he could not bring himself to approach them. Now, however, they were all going to be sitting together in the same carriage for the next hour or more and surely they would not object to a little conversation. The only problem was that they were not sitting together and he could not make up his mind whom he should approach first. He looked them over, one by one.

The old man who had picked the argument with him was without a doubt the eldest of the group and judging by his age, it was likely that he had started his present job after retirement. Thinking about this, it occurred to Kyosuke that it was probably as a result of having to work at some boring job at his age that the man was so bad-tempered . . .

After seeing Kyosuke off that morning, Kimiko had kept herself as busy as a bee. She was a small, slim person, but she was quite energetic and a good worker.

The night before, Kyosuke had taken her to bed before she even had time to hang the curtains and they had found it so exhilarating to have sex in their new house that they had both forgotten how tired they were. Another reason why they had found it so exciting was that now that they had a home of their own, they wanted to start a family, so they did not need to bother with any precautions. They had made love countless times until they had both fallen into an exhausted sleep, but Kimiko did not feel tired at all. This was a major event in their marriage and she felt like a newly wed all over again.

Although late November in the suburbs is rather chilly, she was so busy arranging things and moving the furniture around that her forehead was beaded with perspiration and she decided to take a short break after taking the empty packing cases out into the garden. The garden was very small and while she was breaking up the cardboard boxes, she felt someone's eyes on her. She looked up and saw a skinny old woman looking at her over the hedge.

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That must be our new neighbor, she thought as she pushed her hair back unconsciously with one hand. What was her name now. . . ? Oh yes, Muramatsu, that's it.

She made her way over to the hedge which divided their garden from the next and smiling warmly, she said:

"Good morning, I am Kimiko Ikegami, we have just moved in. You must be Mrs. Muramatsu."

The old lady looked Kimiko slowly up and down. Kimiko was wearing jeans and a tee shirt.

"Please excuse the state I'm in . . ." Kimiko said, smiling embarrassedly.

The old lady did not return her smile.

"I thought it was only good manners to introduce yourself to your neighbors when you first move into a new home. You should save the informalities until later."

Kimiko was astounded by the antagonism in the other's voice.

"I'm very sorry. I meant to come over as soon as I had finished tidying up . . ."

"You young people don't seem to know the meaning of manners," the woman said stingingly. "Anyway, the name is Murakoshi, not Muramatsu."

Watching her as she made her way back into her house, Kimiko gave a deep sigh.

"I can see that we are going to have problems with our neighbors," she said to herself.

Kyosuke looked at the other four men.

One was a swarthy, plump fellow who sat clutching a black leather case as if he was afraid it would fall off his lap any moment. He looked about fortyish and gave the impression of being very nervous. His eyes behind his thick glasses were closed, but he didn't seem to be asleep. He was probably scared that someone might meet his eye.

Kimiko pressed the doorbell and after a second she heard a reply in a high-pitched voice. She straightened her hair again. She was wearing a smart dress and had made herself up. She thought that she should get the introductions over with before she made any more enemies.

"Oh, you must be the person who has just moved in. How do you do? Please come in."

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The woman started to rattle on as soon as she came to the door and Kimiko hardly had the chance to introduce herself.

She was hustled into the house before she could refuse. Kozue Takasugi was the type of woman Kimiko disliked the most. She did nothing but complain about her husband, who was an accountant, and the cost of living, watching television the whole time she was speaking.

"I am afraid that I have to visit the other neighbors . . ." Kimiko said, and heaved a sigh of relief when she finally managed to get out.

Kyosuke looked at the man who was sitting directly opposite him. He was about forty-five or forty-six, wearing a very expensive coat and looking every inch a gentleman. Kyosuke guessed that he was probably involved in some kind of intellectual profession.

Kimiko was relieved to find someone whom she could relax and talk with.

"Yes, our son is in senior high now," Keiko Yagisawa was saying as she poured out some tea. "He says that he doesn't want to commute from here so he's got himself an apartment in town."

"That must be very lonely for you."

"Yes, my husband doesn't get back from work until late. He's a university professor, you know. . . "

"Oh really? A professor?"

"It is not all that good a job, but . . ." Keiko smiled. "He teaches in the evenings as well and doesn't get back until ten o'clock, eleven if he misses the train."

The small living room was lined with shelves which were crammed full of books. It was obviously the house of an intellectual. Keiko was rather a weak-looking person, but had a beautiful character and Kimiko felt that living here was not going to be so bad after all.

The fourth man was a typical office worker. He was about thirty-two and of average weight and height. He would appear to have rushed out as his hair was not combed and his necktie was crooked. He was reading a golf magazine and practicing his swings as he sat there. As soon as the train started to move after the express had passed, Mr. Office-worker fell asleep with his mouth open.

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Everything about him is typical, Kyosuke thought, smiling to himself.

The last person was the one sitting furthest from Kyosuke and in his student days, he had obviously been an athlete. He had broad shoulders and a strong-looking body. His crew cut made him look quite young, but judging from his paunch, he was probably about thirty-five.

These five men were his new neighbors and this time he was not living in rented accommodation so he would be with them for a long time. There was no need to hurry. If he took his time and chatted with them, little by little they would grow to understand each other.

Kyosuke was not a believer in first impressions. He worked in a very busy office where the staff changed with bewildering speed and often he would meet someone who looked very interesting, but after he got to know them better, they would turn out to be just the opposite. The only person who truly lived up to his first impression was Kimiko, he thought fondly.

Anyway, it's still only the first day, he thought as he tried to get comfortable on the hard seat.

The only thing that worried him a bit was that apart from the bad-tempered old man, none of them had so much as looked his way and he got the feeling that they were trying to avoid him.

"The one who was reading the golf magazine was probably Mr. Aso."

"Ah so?"

"Idiot!" Kimiko said, laughing as she served him a second bowl of rice. "There were lots of golf magazines in his house."

"What's his wife like?"

"She looks very tough. They've got two children, one is three and the other is only one, but she is five months pregnant already."

"Ah! That's probably why her husband fell asleep on the train."

"The sportsman type was probably Mr. Eguchi. His wife is a pretty woman and she's got a really good taste in clothes. Although they are quite different types, she seems to be very friendly with Mrs. Aso; it's probably because they both have three-year-old children."

"Anyway," Kyosuke said, sipping his hot tea, "they're all our neighbors so we'll just have to do our best to get on well with them."

"Yes, particularly in a deserted place like this, we can't pick and choose."

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"It took all we had to get this place, so we'll have to stay," Kyosuke said. "It will be twenty years at least until we can pay off the loan."

"Say, I know we have already eaten, but how about a drink? I'd like to propose a toast." Although she did not drink as a rule, Kimiko brought out a bottle of beer and pouring it into two glasses, she gave one to Kyosuke. Raising her own, she said: "To a happy future in this house."

"Cheers." Kyosuke said, and the two glasses touched with a gentle clink.

At that moment the lights all went out.

—TUESDAY—

"I say . . . over here."

Kyosuke looked over at the man who had called him and after a moment remembered who it was.

"Oh, good afternoon. Thanks for all your help."

They were in a coffee bar on the first floor of the building where he worked and the man who had telephoned and asked him to come, mysteriously not giving his name, worked for the real-estate agency which had sold him the house. His name was Ishihara.

"I'm glad that I could have been of assistance."

Kyosuke sat down opposite him and ordered a coffee.

"I'm sorry to call you out during office hours."

"That's okay, I'm always having to visit people on business so I'm often out of the office. What can I do for you?"

"I was wondering if everything was okay at your new house. Nothing has happened, has it?"

"That's very kind of you, but I'm pleased to be able to tell you that everything is just fine. Of course, it's a bit inconvenient with regard to the shops, but we knew that before we moved in."

"That's good."

Ishihara seemed to be relieved for some reason.

"Oh yes, the only thing is that the power went off last night."

"A power cut? Did you find the cause?"

"Yes, it was just a fuse, although we weren't using any heavy appliances. But anyway, it's nothing for you to worry about."

"That's a relief. Should anything come up, however, please don't hesitate to get in touch with me."

"Thank you very much, it's very kind of you."

"Not at all."

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So saying, Ishihara went out, leaving Kyosuke drinking his coffee.

He is a very conscientious agent, he thought. Fancy coming to ask for complaints without my having called him. All the same . . .

For some reason he was a bit disturbed by the way in which Ishihara had asked if nothing had happened, almost as if he had half-expected something would . . .

"Mrs. Ikegami . . ."

Kimiko was hanging out the bedclothes to air when Mrs. Takasugi called out to her from the other side of the hedge.

"Good morning."

"You wouldn't like to come to the supermarket with me, would you? Tomorrow is a holiday so there will be lots of bargains."

Kimiko hesitated for a moment. She did not enjoy Kazue's company all that much and she still had a lot of work to do in the house. She had plenty of food in the larder and did not need anything urgently. She was about to refuse when she realized that Kazue might take offense and after all, they were going to be living together for a long time to come. . .

"Yes, I'd love to."

"Go and get ready then, I'll wait here."

Kimiko started for the house when she glanced up at the sky. It was sunny at the moment, but there were also quite a few clouds. Maybe it would be safer to take the sleeping quilts indoors.

Kazue seemed to guess what was on her mind for she said: "Don't worry about the quilts, just leave them there. You can get Mrs. Murakoshi to keep her eye on them."

"But I don't like to ask—"

"Nonsense, I'll ask her for you, but you'll have to leave the back door open or she won't be able to get in."

Kimiko did not like to leave the door unlocked and felt that it would probably be easier if she just took the quilts indoors herself, but looking over, she saw that Kazue was already talking to Mrs. Murakoshi and realized that it was too late to refuse. She unlocked the door.

"Hello." It was a deep, husky voice. "Is that Mr. Ikegami?"

"Yes, that's right," Kyosuke replied without stopping his work. "Who is speaking, please?"

The person on the other end of the line did not answer.

"I believe you've just bought a house, haven't you?"

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"Yes, what about it?"
"You're not wanted there."
"What?"
"Get out while you still have the chance."
"Who are you? Who is this speaking?"
The line went dead.
"Damn it!"
Kyosuke slammed the phone down so violently that the man on the next desk looked up.
"What's wrong?"
"It's just someone playing some kind of practical joke."
He tried to get back to his work but found that he could not concentrate properly. Why should that call make him so uneasy? And what was the meaning of that threat, "while you still have the chance?"
Whoever it was knew that he had bought the house and also knew his work number. What was going on?
He suddenly thought of Kimiko and stretched out his hand to the phone, but then he remembered that their new house had not been connected yet and he did not know which of the neighbors would take a message for him.
As he said, it was probably just a joke, someone trying to irritate him.

The rain was so heavy that it bounced back from the road's thin surface, making it look like a grey river.
"Just look at the rain." Kozue said.
They had gone to a restaurant for lunch after they had finished their shopping and it was not until they came to leave that they realized it was raining. Kimiko went and bought a cheap plastic umbrella which they both sheltered under as they walked home, but it was a twenty-minute walk and Kimiko was soaked by the time they got there. Even though it was she who had bought the umbrella, Kozue had insisted on holding it, leaving Kimiko exposed on one side.
"Goodbye," Kozue said at her porch as she handed back the umbrella. "Wasn't it a good thing I asked Mrs. Murakoshi to take in your quilts for you?"
Kimiko had to struggle to keep her temper. Instead of thanking her for the use of the umbrella, she actually seemed to expect Kimiko's gratitude. She realized that it was not worth making an

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enemy over a small thing like that so mumbling something that could be taken for a thank you, she hurried back to her own house.

She was so wet that she thought she would go in through the kitchen to avoid messing up their new house. She went through the side gate and stopped dead in her tracks. She could not believe her eyes.

"She couldn't . . . The old . . ." she murmured unconsciously. There in the garden were the two quilts. They were so sodden that the poles she had hung them on were bending under the weight.

"Stop crying," Kyosuke said, a bit fed up.

"I can't help it— I'm so mad—" No matter how hard she tried, she could not stop the tears. "How could she do a thing like that?"

"She's very old, she's probably getting a bit absent-minded and forgot."

"No, I bet she left them out on purpose. I'm to blame, too. I should never have gone out and left them in the garden—I'm sorry."

"It's nothing. It's not as if we can't use them anymore."

"But they are wringing wet. It was all I could do to carry them into the bathroom they were so heavy. Even when they dry out, I don't know if we'll be able to use them."

"We can buy some new ones then. They were only old ones we brought with us so it's no real loss."

"Mmm . . ."

Kimiko had stopped crying so Kyosuke changed the subject.

"I heard from the phone company today. We'll be connected next week."

"Really? That's good." Kimiko smiled.

"Until then, is there anyone here that I could ask to give you a message?"

"Mmm—well, we can forget about next door, and I'm not too keen on Mrs. Takasugi— Why?"

"Oh nothing in particular, just in case. You know."

"Yes, well, I'll ask Mrs. Yagisawa then."

"What, the professor's wife?"

"That's right, she's a nice woman."

Kyosuke decided it would probably be better not to tell her about the phone call he had had that afternoon, it would only make her worry.

"What are we going to do about our bed tonight?" Kimiko asked.

"What's wrong with the visitor's quilts?"

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"But there's only one set."

"That will be ample . . . ample," Kyosuke said with a lecherous grin.

"You've got a one-track mind!" Kimiko exclaimed, blushing.

—WEDNESDAY—

When the doorbell rang, Kimiko was in the bathroom doing the laundry.

"Just a minute!"

She washed the detergent off her hands and wiped them on the towel before going to the door, so she took a few minutes getting there.

"Yes," she said, opening the door on the chain. There was nobody there. She guessed that it was a mistake or some children playing a joke—but there were not any children around there who would do something like that.

She undid the chain and opening the door, she noticed a small paper bag on the porch . . .

"Leave that house."

It was the same voice as yesterday and Kyosuke realized that whoever it was, he was trying to disguise his voice.

"Who are you?" Kyosuke asked, trying to keep calm. "One of the neighbors?"

"No!" The man shouted with unexpected violence, and in doing so, he forgot to disguise his voice.

I know that voice from somewhere, Kyosuke thought. "Why are you giving me this warning?"

"It's for your own sake."

So saying, the man hung up. Kyosuke bit his lip thoughtfully as he replaced the receiver and noticed that his hand was shaking slightly.

Kimiko took a portable tape-recorder out of the bag and put it on the kitchen table.

What is it, I wonder . . .

She looked at the used recorder for a few minutes in perplexity. Finally she decided that at least she should listen to the tape that was left in it.

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To begin with she thought that the tape must be blank, but then she noticed that there was some faint background noise. She turned the volume up full and heard a muffled whispering.

I wonder what it is . . .

She strained her ears and after a short while she had a horrible premonition. Her cheeks became scarlet with embarrassment and as the tape continued, she realized that she was right.

The voices on the tape were her own and Kyosuke's. It was a recording of them making love the night before.

She could hear herself almost crying as she climaxed. She could also hear Kyosuke whispering that he loved her . . .

She slammed her hand down on the stop button, her cheeks burning with shame. Tearing out the cassette, she pulled all the tape out, tore it into shreds, and threw it on the floor.

She ran to the front door, flung it open, and looked around for the perpetrator of this foul joke to vent her rage on. Of course, there was nobody there.

Who could have done it? Her anger turned to fear. Whoever it was had not only spied on them, but had taped everything and then delivered the tape to her. There was a definite threat indicated by this behavior.

Before going back indoors, she went around to the bedroom window and there, in the mud from the previous day's rain, was a set of woman's footprints, different from her own. However, unlike in a detective story, they were not very clear and had no special characteristics.

Kimiko went back into the house and just sat in a daze for several hours. The fact that someone would hate her enough to have done this came as a terrible shock to her.

"What's wrong?" Kyosuke asked.

"*Nothing, I just thought it would be nice to eat out for a change.*"

She had come into town and rung him from a phone near his office. She waited for him to finish and then they both went to a restaurant together. It was a long time since they had had a date like this.

"I don't mind at all, but are you sure nothing happened?"

Kimiko could not bring herself to tell him about the tape as she did not want to worry him unnecessarily. She told herself that this was probably the last she would ever hear of it so it would be best to just forget about it.

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Kyosuke could tell from her behavior that something was wrong, but he forced himself not to worry too deeply about it. He was more worried about the mystery phone calls. He was convinced now that they weren't a joke and even considered going to the police about them. However, he had no idea who could be responsible and so the police probably could not do anything to help him.

Anyway, he would keep quiet for the time being.

They each had their own problems but they were both pretending that nothing had happened.

They were both surprised when Yagisawa suddenly spoke to them.

"You are Mr. Ikegami, aren't you? We're neighbors but I don't even know your face very well. My name is Yagisawa."

This was the first time Kyosuke had met one of the five on his homeward journey.

"What do you think of the house now that you are settled in?"

True to his profession, he had a good carrying voice.

"Well, it's difficult to say, we have only been there a few days so far." Kyosuke replied in a noncommittal way.

"I suppose you find it quite inconvenient." Mr. Yagisawa smiled at Kimiko in a most friendly fashion. "I expect you find it quite lonely, too."

"Not at all, I'm so busy and all the other ladies are such nice people." Kimiko was surprised that she could lie so easily, even though she had said it half in sarcasm.

They chatted about neutral subjects such as work for some time and then fell into silence until they reached their station. Standing up, Yagisawa said in a casual way:

"Well, what do you think? Do you intend to live here for long?"

Kyosuke was speechless for a moment.

"Of course—after all, it is my house."

"I see . . . well, good night."

Yagisawa nodded slightly, then, moving with remarkable agility, he got off the train and walked home ahead of them.

"I wonder what he meant by that," Kimiko said as they walked along the road back from the station in silence.

Kyosuke took some time with the key, trying to open the front door.

"What's wrong?" Kimiko asked.

Kyosuke turned the knob and finally got the door open.

"The door, it wasn't locked," he said, looking Kimiko in the eye.

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—THURSDAY—

"Hey, what's wrong? You don't seem yourself today," one of Kyosuke's colleagues asked and tapped him on the shoulder. Kyosuke laughed and tried to cover up, but he felt irritated because it was true, he could not concentrate on his work.

Last night Kimiko had insisted that she had locked the door and they had ended up having an argument. The door had been open, but nothing in the house had been touched and nothing stolen, so if someone had picked the lock, what was their object? When Kimiko had told him about the tape, he had been shocked. It was an obvious case of harassment, but they did not know who was responsible so they had no choice but to let it stand. It was not, however, something that could be ignored.

Kimiko was very angry and demanded that he do something about it. He did his best to make a joke of the whole affair, though, as he thought that if he showed her he was worried, it would only add to her unrest.

He wondered if there was someone he could discuss it with, and at that moment, the phone rang.

"Hello, Ikegami here."

"You know what I want." It was the same voice. "Get out of that house, now!"

"Not unless you give me a good reason."

"It's for your own good."

"So you say. . . "

Kyosuke broke off. A police car was driving by his building and for some reason its siren sounded strange. As the siren passed the window, he could also hear it in the phone.

He put the phone down on his desk and flew down the stairs from his third-floor office. The man had to be phoning from one of the phone booths on the first floor.

The phones just came into view when he saw a familiar figure disappearing out of the building.

"Wait!"

He leapt forward, and grabbing the man's arm, he pulled him back. The man turned around nervously—it was the real-estate agent, Ishihara.

Kimiko had hardly slept a wink the night before. Who had opened the front door, and for what reason? She could distinctly remember

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locking the door when she went out, but as Kyosuke had said, why would a thief force open the door and then leave without stealing anything?

However, if the object had been intimidation, she could understand it. They were demonstrating how easily they could enter the house any time they wanted to. That was it! She would change the locks on the front door and the French windows for stronger ones . . .

She was still thinking about all this when morning came and it was time to get up.

She did the housework and laundry as usual and was sitting down to read the paper before she realized how tired she was. She decided to lie down for a minute and folding a cushion in half to make a pillow, she closed her eyes. She was not going to sleep, just relax for a few minutes.

Before she knew what had happened, she was sound asleep.

"What?! Do you mean we are not the first people to live in that house?"

Kyosuke was so surprised that he could hardly believe his ears.

"That's right. There were two other people, two families that is, who were there before you."

Ishihara had lost his threatening stance and as they sat in the coffee bar, he seemed anything but an intimidator.

"But—" Kyosuke was having trouble understanding what he was hearing. "Do you mean there is something wrong with the deeds on the place?"

"Oh, no, not at all. You are the first people to actually buy the house. The others had only rented it and of course, when they died, the lease automatically—"

"Hang on a minute," Kyosuke interrupted. "Did you just say 'when they died?' "

Ishihara wiped the perspiration off his forehead.

"Yes, that's right."

Kyosuke swallowed heavily and settled himself in his chair.

"Why don't you tell me the whole story?"

"Well, you see, both of the other families that lived in that house died in accidents—within two weeks of their having moved in."

Kyosuke could feel the blood draining from his face.

"You mean that you hid something as important as that when you sold us the place?!"

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"But you must look at our side of it. If we told people about the deaths, we would never be able to sell it."

Of course Kyosuke understood this, but he could not help but feel deceived.

"But why did you make those threatening phone calls then?"

"I thought that you should know about the history of the house, but my superiors strictly forbid it. All the same, I couldn't get it off my conscience. I was very anxious in case something should happen to you or your wife so I—"

"So you made those threatening calls to try and make me leave before it was too late."

"I am very sorry."

Kyosuke calmed down. This man had only been thinking of his well-being and had even gone against a strict order from his superiors in telling him all this.

"I understand," he said. "I won't tell anyone in your firm that you told me about this."

"Thank you very much."

"But what does it all mean?"

"I am sure that it is just a coincidence. The first was a family of three and they died in an accident when they were out for a drive nearby. The second family were newlyweds and one day—it was in winter and it had been snowing—the husband was coming back from a party drunk when he fell over in the woods by the road. He froze to death and his wife committed suicide a few days later."

"In that house?"

"No, she drowned in a river near her parent's home."

Kyosuke gave a sigh of relief.

"Anyway, after that our company did the house up to make it look like new and sold it to you."

"But none of the neighbors told us about any of this."

"Well, it's not really the kind of thing people want to talk about."

All the same, could there be any connection between the cassette tape and these two accidents?

Leaving the repentant real-estate agent, Kyosuke went up to the third floor and was immediately called by one of his colleagues.

"Hey, Ikegami. Where have you been?"

"Why? Do you want something?"

"You had a phone call from a Mrs. Yagisawa. She said that you were to go straight home, your wife has gassed herself . . ."

* * *

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"Kimiko!" Kimiko was lying in bed and smiled weakly at him. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, Mrs. Yagisawa found me in time . . ."

"I wanted to borrow some soy sauce and came over to see if you had any." Mrs. Yagisawa was sitting by Kimiko's bed.

"I don't know how to thank you," Kyosuke said, bowing his head to the floor.

"There is no need, I only did what anyone would in that situation."

"No, I'll come over later and thank you properly."

"Oh, please don't bother." She smiled at Kimiko. "Anyway, your husband is home now so I will leave you both together. Look after yourself."

"Thank you—for everything."

Kyosuke saw her to the front door and then came back to Kimiko.

"Kyosuke!" Kimiko rushed into his arms and collapsed in tears. "I'm scared—I'm so scared."

Kyosuke held her close and spoke to her soothingly.

"There is no need to worry, it's all right."

Kimiko shook her head violently.

"No, you are wrong, you don't understand. They say that I fell asleep and that the kettle boiled over and put the flame out—but I did not have anything on the gas! I know for sure that I didn't!"

After they had finished dinner and had a bath, Kimiko seemed to have recovered.

"What shall we do?"

"Do about what?"

"Somebody hates us and tried to kill me."

"Don't be silly."

"But it's true. That tape could be considered a bad joke, but trying to gas me shows a genuine murderous intent. If Mrs. Yagisawa hadn't happened to find me, I would have been—I would be dead now."

Kyosuke became thoughtful. The accidents which killed the previous tenants of the house, the car crash and the man falling over in the woods and freezing to death—it was feasible that they could both have been murder.

"But why should anyone want to kill us?"

"I don't know."

After a while Kyosuke said: "I'll go and discuss it with Mr. Yagisawa."

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"Yagisawa?"

"I think we can trust him, don't you?"

"But he did say something a bit strange last night, didn't he?"

"Yes, but it was his wife who saved your life today."

Kimiko nodded unwillingly.

"That's true."

"I might as well go straight away," Kyosuke said, rising to his feet.

Yagisawa nodded. "Yes, it is true. The other people who lived in that house all met with accidents. Didn't you know?"

"The real-estate company forgot to mention it."

"Yes, I can understand that—would you care for a whiskey?"

"No, thank you, I'm fine."

"Oh, well you wouldn't mind if I helped myself, would you?"

Yagisawa poured himself a whiskey and water and took a sip.

"I'm sure you must realize that we don't really like to talk about the deaths either."

"Yes, of course. Personally, I'm prepared to believe that they were both unrelated accidents, but I am more concerned with that tape recording and the attempted gas poisoning today. It seems to be taking a practical joke too far when it threatens somebody's life. I want to know who it was and what they expect to gain by it."

"And what do you expect of me?"

"You are a professor and have good standing in society. You must be used to judging people, and I feel sure that you must be able to guess who would be likely to do a thing like that."

"Mmm . . . That's a very difficult thing to ask. It's true that I have known my neighbors ever since I moved here and have a good idea as to what kind of people they are, but you are asking that I should condemn one of them without a shred of evidence."

"I realize it's an unreasonable request to make . . ."

Yagisawa gazed at Kyosuke for a while with a strange expression on his face.

"Mr. Ikegami."

"Yes?"

"If your wife is so scared, maybe the best thing would be for you to move somewhere else."

"I'm afraid I can't do that," Kyosuke replied. "I've finally managed to buy my own house and I'm not about to give it up now."

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"I see," Yagisawa said, nodding. "So you intend to live here indefinitely then?"

"Yes," Kyosuke said definitely.

Yagisawa sat for a while gazing at the floor, apparently deep in thought. He looked at Kyosuke for a while then said:

"I understand."

—THURSDAY MIDNIGHT—

The men were all gathered in the Murakoshis' living room.

"He has no intention of leaving," Yagisawa said. "He said so quite clearly."

They all gave a sigh of disappointment. Only Murakoshi seemed pleased by the news.

"Well, we needn't wait any longer. We all know what we must do."

"Hold on a minute, Mr. Murakoshi," Yagisawa said. "This is a serious problem and we mustn't let ourselves get carried away."

"What do you mean? We've got no intention of letting that couple live here and if they won't move of their own volition, there is only one option left to us."

"I know all that, but this isn't something that can be settled so simply. After all, there is the danger to be considered."

"We did not have problems the previous two times."

"We were lucky."

"Yes, we had God on our side." Murakoshi's voice became quite high-pitched and he shook with excitement.

"But if we keep doing it, someone's going to get suspicious," Yagisawa said quietly. "We should hear everyone's opinion first."

The other three men all looked rather uncomfortable and glanced at each other as if they were waiting for someone else to speak first.

"Takasugi," Yagisawa prompted. The accountant adjusted his glasses and looked up. "What do you think?"

Takasugi cleared his throat and mumbled, "Well, to be quite honest—that is—personally—"

"You can't decide," Yagisawa finished for him and he nodded silently.

"Since when were you such a weakling?" Murakoshi asked, raising his voice. "You can't expect to protect your land without being a bit more positive."

"Aso, how about you?"

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Yagisawa raised his voice slightly.

"I've given the matter a lot of thought. Well—there's no rush and we don't want to make a decision we might regret later on—I think we should wait a little longer and see what happens."

Murakoshi snorted in disgust at the office worker's answer.

"The way I look at it," the sportsman, Eguchi, said, "the last two times we had good reason for what we did. The first man almost killed Aso's child with his reckless driving and the second one . . ." He hesitated.

"It's okay," Takasugi said. "He and my wife . . ."

"There's no need to go into that again," Yagisawa said, interrupting.

Eguchi continued:

"This new couple, however, haven't done anything directly, and although I'm not suggesting that we should leave them alone, I don't think that it is necessary to do anything so drastic." He looked around the other faces. "What do you say? Shall we continue to act indirectly?"

"You're all chicken!" Murakoshi exploded with anger. "Since when were you such a weak-minded lot?!" His eyes flashed as he looked them over, one by one. "Have you forgotten what it was like when we first moved here? Not a street light from here to the station, and when it rained the road became so muddy we could hardly walk! Swarms of mosquitoes in the summer and in the winter the road would be closed by the slightest snowfall.

"How many times did we have to go to the council offices before things improved? Tens, no hundreds of times!"

He looked around the circle of faces, but nobody could meet his gaze.

"Why is it we can come home safely at night? Because we've got streetlights all the way to the station! Come on, tell me I'm wrong!

"We paid for the road to be surfaced out of our own pockets. In summer we went out and sprayed all the puddles where the mosquitoes were likely to breed and as a result, our children can play outside at last."

His voice rose in pitch.

"Our sweat is in this land! These outsiders think they can come here when everything is finished and enjoy the fruits of our labors for free! Did we do all this for them? I should say not! This area is ours and ours alone!"

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He stood panting, his emotion temporarily spent. No one said a word.

"Well," Yagisawa said after a minute. "What shall we do?"

The other three all looked at each other.

"Let's do it," Eguchi said. "Mr. Murakoshi has made me change my mind."

Takasugi joined in.

"I agree. They don't show any indication of leaving, so let's do it."

Aso shrugged: "If that's what everyone wants . . ."

Yagisawa nodded and said, "So we are all agreed then. Any objections?"

There were none.

"Very well. It's unfortunate, but it looks as if our new neighbors will meet with an accident."

Murakoshi smiled with satisfaction.

"How are we going to do it?"

"When are we going to do it?"

"I think we should do it straight away before we change our minds," Yagisawa said. "How about tomorrow morning?"

—FRIDAY—

Eh? Kyosuke thought as he walked out of the front door in the morning to find his five neighbors standing in a group on the misty road. I wonder what they're doing there.

"Good morning, Mr. Ikegami," Yagisawa said, leaving the group and walking towards him.

"Good morning," Kyosuke replied a little stiffly as Yagisawa approached, smiling broadly. "What can I do for you?"

A look of surprise came over the other's face.

"Nothing. We just thought it was about time we all became friends."

"Friends?"

"Yes, we are all stuck out here together whether we like it or not, so why should you have to walk to the station on your own?"

"Oh, I'm sorry."

He didn't really understand what was going on, but he couldn't very well refuse, so he allowed Yagisawa to lead him over to the others.

Why should they suddenly change their attitude toward me like this? he thought uneasily.

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"I'm sorry we didn't wait for you before," Yagisawa said as they walked down the road. "It's just that this is such an inconvenient place that we didn't think that you would actually want to stay here long. Anyway, we thought we would wait until you made up your mind before we became too friendly, otherwise it would only have made the parting all that much more difficult."

"As I told you last night, I don't intend to go anywhere."

"Exactly, that's why we waited for you today; we're all very pleased."

Upon this, the other four men all greeted him warmly. Surprisingly enough, even the antagonistic old Murakoshi smiled warmly and slapped him on the shoulder.

"I'm sorry if I was a bit rude to you on Monday," he said. "I'm afraid that you tend to get a bit grumpy when you reach my age. I hope you won't hold it against me."

"Oh . . ." Kyosuke was taken aback and wondered what had brought this on.

"Oh yes," the old man continued. "I hear from my wife that she forgot to take your quilts in when it rained the other day. I am very sorry, but she is getting a bit forgetful in her old age. Of course, we'll pay for new quilts."

"No, that's okay."

"But I insist."

"It really doesn't matter. They were old quilts anyway."

"Well, if you are quite sure . . . but in that case you must come around for dinner one night. My wife wants to apologize in person, but she is so ashamed that she has been avoiding you."

"That's very kind of you."

Takasugi spoke next.

"I'm afraid that I owe you an apology, too."

"Really?"

"Yes, it's about that tape. . . "

"What?"

"My wife was responsible."

Kyosuke was too amazed to feel angry. He looked at Takasugi blankly.

"It's very embarrassing for me to talk about, but I'm afraid I'm not altogether fit and can't satisfy her—well, she—she was jealous of you two and made that tape. When I found out what she had done, I was very angry and told her to get rid of the tape, but I never imagined that she would leave it on your doorstep like that."

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"Forget it."

Kyosuke nodded towards him, but he still could not understand what was going on. He only needed someone to admit to opening his door and trying to gas Kimiko and all the events of the last week would be explained. At that moment he looked around at his surroundings.

"Just a minute, this isn't the road to the station."

"Who can that be?" Kimiko said in surprise as the front doorbell rang. She went to the door and found Mrs. Murakoshi, Mrs. Takasugi, and Mrs. Yagisawa lined up on the porch.

"We are very sorry to butt in on you like this," Mrs. Yagisawa said. "But we had something we wanted to discuss with you."

"It's no bother, please come in."

Kimiko led them into the living room and hurriedly laid out cushions for them to sit on.

"I'll pour you some tea."

"That's okay, please don't bother. You just carry on with your washing; we'll wait here."

Kimiko went out to the kitchen and finished boiling water for the washing, then poured out some tea.

"Well, if you are sure you don't mind, I'll just finish the laundry."

"Don't worry about us, go ahead."

Kimiko went into the bathroom and poured the remainder of the boiling water into the washing machine. She glanced back and saw Mrs. Murakoshi standing in the entrance, looking at her.

"It's hard work, isn't it?"

"Yes."

Kimiko bent over the bathtub and suddenly Mrs. Murakoshi rushed over and pushed her in.

"You're going to kill me?" Kyosuke asked in shock. Eguchi, Tagasugi, and Aso were holding his arms and he was unable to resist.

They were standing in the woods some way from the station. There were no other houses for miles so even if he were to cry out for help, nobody was likely to hear him.

"The express will pass here in a few minutes," Yagisawa said, looking at his watch. "And you will commit suicide by jumping in front of it."

"Wait a minute! What have I done? Why do you want to kill me?"

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"It's difficult to explain," Yagisawa said quietly. "I suppose you could call it a kind of defense mechanism. Our five houses comprise a harmonious society and your intrusion has disturbed our daily routines. In order to protect our way of life, we must act like the white corpuscles in the body and destroy the invader—you."

"So the last two occupants of that house—"

"That's right."

"You're all insane!" Kyosuke cried, horrified. "You'll get caught one day and then it will be prison for the lot of you!" He gave a sudden start. "What about Kimiko?"

"Your pretty little wife should have been taken care of by now," Murakoshi said with a cold smile.

"You're insane! You're all mad!"

Kyosuke tried to struggle, but he could not do anything against three of them. Yagisawa pricked up his ears.

"It's coming . . ."

In the silence, the noise of the distant train could be heard. The rails began to sing.

"This is goodbye then, Ikegami," Yagisawa said.

It was hopeless to struggle as he was dragged up to the small cliff over the tracks.

The train rushed towards them . . .

Kimiko struggled violently when her head plunged into the bath. The water got into her nose and mouth and she choked. She did not know which way was up, she just fought blindly until she found her head out of the water.

Through misty eyes, she saw Murakoshi brandishing the lid of the bath over her head, a horrifying expression on her face. Kimiko instinctively grabbed the woman and the lid came down on her shoulder. Using all her weight, Kimiko dragged Murakoshi to the bath and pushing her in head first, held her under the water, oblivious to her flailing arms and legs.

When she finally came to her senses, Kimiko was horrified to find that the other woman had stopped moving.

I never even knew her first name, she thought absently.

She climbed out of the bath and saw Mrs. Takasugi and Mrs. Yagisawa standing in the doorway, looking at her.

"—Er—she—" Kimiko tried to explain, but Mrs. Yagisawa stopped her, saying:

"It's all right, it's best this way."

* * *

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They ran out of the woods. As soon as the train stopped there would be a commotion and they could not afford to be seen by any of the passengers.

Once they got back to the road, Yagisawa stopped and looked back.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

Kyosuke was still in a state of shock and could not understand what had happened.

A moment before the express had rushed through the cutting below his feet, Yagisawa had pushed Murakoshi from behind. The old man had fallen without a sound and they could see him lying face-down on the tracks until the train hid him from view.

"Why. . . ? Why . . . ?" Kyosuke murmured.

"Murakoshi knew nothing but hatred," Yagisawa said. "He would have ruined us all if we had continued listening to him, so the four of us got together and decided that this was the only solution—Don't worry, your wife is safe, but what are you going to do now?"

"Do?"

"We thought you might like to take Murakoshi's place and become the fifth member of our little community."

"But— You—you just committed murder!"

"That was just a small sacrifice to protect our society. What are you going to do? Are you going to rush to the police, or—"

Eguchi slapped Kyosuke on the shoulder.

"Let's be friends."

"That's right," Yagisawa said, smiling. "That's your house, isn't it—the house that you've struggled so hard to buy? You don't think you'd be able to live there on your own, do you, if we all got arrested? You said yourself that you intended to stay . . ."

—EPILOGUE—

"See you later," Kyosuke said as he gave Kimiko a kiss on the cheek.

"Look after yourself."

"And you. Don't overdo things."

"Don't worry."

Kimiko's pregnancy was already noticeable.

"Well, goodbye then."

"Goodbye."

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The other four men were waiting for him outside and after they had exchanged greetings, all five of them set off for the station.

"Spring is here at last," Yagisawa said, looking up at the buds on the trees.

Murakoshi's death had been put down as suicide resulting from the shock of finding his wife dead in the bathroom. His son soon sold the house to a real-estate agent and it had been standing empty ever since.

Ishihara, the man who had warned Kyosuke to move, had changed companies and the five households were able to enjoy life together without any worries.

That day was warm and there was a light fog hanging over the surrounding woodland. They had almost reached the station when a truck came towards them through the mist. It stopped in front of them.

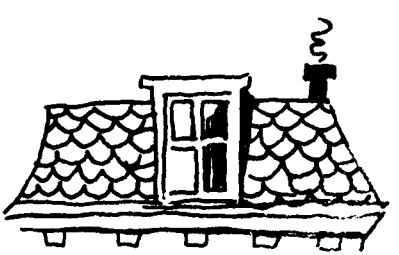
"Excuse me," the young man behind the wheel said, opening the window. "I'm looking for five or six houses that are supposed to be around here somewhere. Do you know where they are?"

"Just keep straight on down this road," Yagisawa said. "You can't miss them."

"Thank you."

The removal truck, loaded with furniture, swayed heavily down the road. The five men looked at each other, then turned to watch the truck disappear into the distance.

—translated by Gavin Frew



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EQMM 50TH ANNIVERSARY CONTEST ANSWERS

And now to close our celebration of *EQMM*'s fifty years of publication, here are the answers to the contest questions which appeared in the January through October issues. A special thanks to all participants and congratulations to the winners!

1. Who was the artist who created the first and many subsequent covers of EQMM?

   Salter

2. Name the famous movie actor/writer/director who published a story in EQMM?

   Orson Welles

3. Which member of a singing group well known in the sixties wrote several stories that were published in EQMM?

   Lee Hays of the Weavers

4. What distinguished writer on food (*How To Cook a Wolf, Consider the Oyster*) published a story in EQMM?

   M. F. K. Fisher

5. Who wrote "The Trailor Murder Mystery," which was reprinted in EQMM in 1952?

   Abraham Lincoln

6. Jorge Luis Borges' first appearance in the English language was in EQMM in 1948. What is the title of his story?

   The Garden of Forking Paths

7. Who translated the story from the Spanish for EQMM?

   Anthony Boucher

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8. The series about A. J. Raffles, "the amateur cracksman," was created by E. W. Hornung. After Hornung's death, the series was continued by Barry Perowne—a pseudonym. What was Barry Perowne's real name?

   Philip Atkey

9. The character of Virginia squire sleuth Uncle Abner was conceived by Melville Davisson Post. Who has kept this series alive in our pages after Post's death?

   John F. Suter

10. Who was the author of the series featuring Section Q's Selena Mead?

    Patricia McGerr

11. *What do eleven of the nineteen authors in this issue have in* common? Either of the following:

    Born in the U.S.A.
    Eleven letters in their names (see March '91 contents page)

12. Which author of a story in this issue had been a featured piano soloist with symphony orchestras across the U.S. and Candada?

    Phyllis Diller

13. Name a Nobel Prize winner whose fiction has appeared in EQMM.

    Rudyard Kipling
    William Butler Yeats
    George Bernard Shaw
    Sinclair Lewis
    John Galsworthy
    Pearl Buck
    T. S. Eliot
    William Faulkner
    Bertrand Russell
    John Steinbeck
    Ernest Hemingway

14. Name a Pulitzer Prize winner whose fiction has appeared in EQMM.

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Marc Connelly
Susan Glaspell
Arthur Miller
Edna St. Vincent Millay
Louis Bromfield
Stephen Vincent Benet
Pearl S. Buck
T. S. Stribling
John P. Marquand
John Steinbeck
William Faulkner
Ernest Hemingway
Mark Van Doren
James Gould Cozzens
MacKinlay Kantor
Kenneth L. Roberts
Norman Mailer
Alice Walker

15. Which *one* of the following has not been published in EQMM?

William F. Buckley, Jr.

16. 17., and 18. A writer and two of her four daughters made names for themselves in the field of mystery fiction from the thirties through the eighties. All three writers contributed stories to EQMM. What are their names?

Helen Reilly, Mary McMullen, and Ursula Curtiss

19. What great detective-story writer died on *The Titanic?*

Jacques Futrelle

20. What was the sobriquet of the fictional detective, Professor Augustus S. F. X. Van Dusen?

The Thinking Machine

21. Who wrote *The Third Man,* first as a film, then as a short novel?

Graham Greene

22. The movie *Love from a Stranger* with Ann Harding and Basil Rathbone (1937) was adapted from a short story by Agatha Christie. What is the title of the story?

Philomel Cottage

23. Who wrote the novel from which Alfred Hitchcock made his

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classic film *Strangers on a Train?*

Patricia Highsmith

24. A twice-made movie and novel about Jack the Ripper originated as a short story. What is the title?

The Lodger

25. Who wrote it?

Marie Belloc Lowndes

26. Who wrote the article, "Watson Was a Woman"?

Rex Stout

27. Who did Sherlock Holmes refer to as "The Woman"?

Irene Adler

28. and 29. Name two short stories in which the evidence in a crime is eaten. Name their authors. Any two of the following:

Lamb to the Slaughter by Roald Dahl
Two Bottles of Relish by Lord Dunsany
Proof of Guilt by Bill Pronzini
The Theft of the Black Jupiter by Margaret Austin
A Tasty Tidbit by Janwillem van de Wetering
Specialty of the House by Stanley Ellin
Local Cuisine by Mary Reed
Seven Art Soups by Stringfellow Forbes

30. Speaking of food, who is Joyce Porter's gluttonous police inspector?

Wilfred Dover

31. and 32. Ruth Rendell won an Edgar from the Mystery Writers of America for two stories that appeared first in EQMM. Name both.

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33. and 34. Name two British recipients of the Grand Master Award from the Mystery Writers of America whose fiction has appeared in EQMM. Any two of the following:

Julian Symons, Michael Gilbert, Eric Ambler, Daphne DuMaurier, Agatha Christie, John Creasey, John le Carré, and Ngaio Marsh

35. Name the author and/or the story from EQMM from which we quote: "Fred Collyer relaxed and smiled at the thought, and the next minute knew quite suddenly that it hadn't been a dream at all. He had heard Marius Follman and Piper Bowles planning a diversion on Crinkle Cut, and he had forgotten because he'd been drunk."

Dick Francis—The Big Story

36. Rambo first appeared in the novel, *First Blood,* which was written by an author whose first fiction appeared in EQMM's Department of First Stories. Name either the author or the story or both.

David Morrell—The Dripping

37. Who is the author of the cult classic, *Time and Again,* whose fiction was also first published professionally in EQMM?

Jack Finney

38. Which 1957 Department of First Stories author was nominated for an Edgar for a story titled "Mousie" published in EQMM in 1981?

Robert Twohy

39. Robert L. Fish's first story, "The Adventure of the Ascot Tie," was published in our Department of Firsts in 1960. The first Robert L. Fish Award for best first short mystery fiction of the year (1983) went to Heidi Vanderbilt for a story in EQMM.

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What is its title?

Locked Doors (as by Lily Carlson)

40. Name the writing team whose first collaboration appeared in EQMM. They were honored with the Ellery Queen Award by the Mystery Writers of America in 1989.

Richard Levinson and William Link

41. Clark Howard won EQMM's Readers Award three times to date. Before that, a short story of his published in EQMM won the the Edgar from the Mystery Writers of America. What is the title of that story?

Horn Man

42, The EQMM Readers Award has also been won by a Canadian. Her/his name?

James Powell

43. And by an English writer. Her/his name?

Robert Barnard

44. Who won the first Ellery Queen Award from the Mystery Writers of America?

Mary J. Latsis and Martha Henissart, a.k.a. Emma Lathen

45. Name the two men who collaborated to write under the pseudonym of Ellery Queen.

Frederic Dannay and Manfred B. Lee

46. Who was nominated for an Academy Award this year for his screen adaptation of Jim Thompson's *The Grifters* and went on to win an Edgar Award for best motion picture?

Donald E. Westlake

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47. Name the author of the novel, *A Shock to the System,* from which we published an excerpt in 1986.

Simon Brett

48. Name the writer, also a contributor to EQMM, who adapted *A Shock to the System* for the movie version starring Michael Caine.

Andrew Klavan

49. Name the longtime EQMM contributor who had two stories adapted for the popular televison series *McMillan and Wife.*

Edward D. Hoch

50. Which EQMM cover model starred in the films *Persona* and *Cries and Whispers?*

Liv Ullman

—THE WINNERS—

First Prize
Lois M. Collins

Second Prize
Peggy Ell

Third Prize
Cynthia L. Rieckhoff

Fourth—Thirteenth Prizes

Ramona Louisa French
Donna Carothers Tracht
Mrs. John J. Newton
John A. McCallum
Michael Specht
Forrest Athey Jr.
Frank D. McSherry Jr.
Joseph J. Maniscalco
Mrs. J. Venverloh
Theodore Lustig

Fourteenth—Twenty-first Prizes

Edie Shannon
Jeffrey Marks
Toby Bromberg
Barbara Grenier
Gloria A. Ofluger
Dr. Loren Gould
Arthur Vidro
Terry Bigham

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Michael Z. Lewin is American-born, but he has a keen eye for British society. In this wry tale, full of snappy dialogue, the characters are caught in the most ironic of dilemmas . . .

THE TRUTH

by MICHAEL Z. LEWIN

When the barman was looking the other way, Walter lifted a glass of white wine from the table and pivoted quickly to obscure his prize from view. With controlled haste he walked into the next room.

Inside the door he came upon a scene.

An extraordinary-looking woman was saying to a man, "I never stay with someone who lies to me, Edward. *Never.*"

"But look, Bran," the man said. He was tall, baby-faced, and begging.

Walter smiled and stopped to watch.

"Go away, Edward. Never darken my bedspread again."

Edward said, "I deserve a chance to explain. There was no ill will involved."

"Did you tell me a deliberate untruth?"

"Yes, but—"

" 'But' nothing. 'Butt' out." The woman turned away.

Walter stepped forward. "The lady has made her wishes clear, Edward."

"Who the hell—"

"Sir Lancelot. Bug off, sunshine."

The choreography of the interchange was not harmed by the sudden approach of a tipsy woman who stuck herself onto one of Edward's arms as soon as he was within reach. "Ooo. I nearly fell down. Eddie, you are a blessing."

Edward turned by reflex and said, "*Don't* call me 'Eddie'."

Walter took Bran by an elbow and led her lightly back to the room he had just left. With a genuine guest in tow, he need fear nobody.

"I didn't need rescuing," Bran said.

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"I wouldn't rescue anybody who did," Walter said.

She hesitated just for a moment. Taking a clue from what he had overheard, Walter said, "I was the one who needed help."

"Oh yes?"

"I'm not a guest. I drove the van with the booze in it and helped set up. I'm supposed to have left and not come back till tomorrow, to shovel up the empties. I've seen some pint-pullers in my time, but you people can't half down it."

She smiled. Then she said, "But your dinner jacket? You deliver bottles in that?"

"Brought it along. Finished my graft, then instead of driving away I changed in the back. Not every day I get my van past Check Point Charlie at the front gate of a place like this. Hey, how about doing me a favour?"

She raised an eyebrow.

He offered her the wine glass. "How about getting me a real drink?"

"Why not?" she said. "What do you mean?" She studied him for a moment. "Scotch?"

"I mean champagne," Walter said. "One whiff of those bubbles and I'm anyone's."

She brought a bottle.

He said, "You're not going to tell me you're the spoiled rich daughter of the household, are you?"

"I'm the spoiled poor outrageous cousin, but they tolerate me because I'm so beautiful."

He looked at her as if evaluating.

"You're not going to tell me I'm not beautiful," she said with an I'm-about-to-be-bored-again sigh.

"No," he said measuredly. "But your kind of looks aren't everybody's cup of cha. Beautiful, but not pretty. Certainly arresting, and compelling to look at."

"If you're applying as a bit of rough, shouldn't you skip the big words and the complicated thoughts?"

"I'm nobody's bit of rough," Walter said. It came out smoothly enough, but both heard a touch of real feeling in his voice.

"I'm sorry," Bran said, an unusual concept for her.

"Normally, I'm people's bit of smooth. I tend to go for the chambermaids and the waitresses and they generally like it when you throw in a few extra syllables."

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When she asked, "Where did you get the extra syllables?" he knew he'd hooked her: no longer talking exclusively about herself.

"I read," he said as if everyone did. "And I'm not stupid. Never take me for someone who is stupid," he said.

"I won't," she said.

The corny thing to do while they paused to assess whether they were beginning something was to pour more champagne. They poured more champagne.

"What's your name, or do I just call you Guinevere."

"They call me Bran."

"Is that your real name or is it just that you give everybody the runs?"

"My given name is Brandy."

"Oh."

She looked at him.

"Walter."

"Equally charming."

"Just don't call me Wally."

"Look, Wally," she said, "you look married to me. You look like you're one of those guys who got married early, before you found out how easy it is to get 'it' without taking the pledge, but then maybe because you're soft or because there's a kid you didn't sort things out. So I say you're still a married man. Am I right?"

He hesitated.

"Oh, you're not going to *lie* to me, are you?"

"Yes wife. No kids," he said.

"Do you think I'm clever for seeing that in you?"

"I suppose." Then, "I don't live with her. She lives in Brighton."

"Do you think I care?"

"You might one day."

She shrugged.

"She was un-Catholic enough for some wild rumpo before, but too Catholic for a divorce after. And she didn't like it when she found out that I had had myself snipped."

Brandy's eyes closed slightly about "snipped."

"Vasectomy," he said.

"Ah."

"I haven't lived with her for six months. A little while ago I tried to get a divorce off her, but she just won't play. It wasn't that I want to marry anybody. It was just to clean things up and make them straight."

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"I see."

"Boring, innit? That's the problem about the truth sometimes."

"I said I was poor, and it's true," Brandy began by way of exchange. "But Daddy will make me rich if I get married. It's one of those trust things. So much a year and more in the second year and more again in the third. He thinks I'm too flighty and wants to see me 'taken care of' and 'settled.' I find that unutterably boring, too."

"Have you thought about marrying?"

"I've been engaged seven times," Brandy said.

"I'd have guessed a hundred."

"You saw an engagement end tonight."

Walter smiled. "You ever been engaged in a van?"

To both their surprises it lasted. They celebrated each marker. A week. A month. Then another. They were different flavours, but out of the same packet: crisp sugar shells but milk chocolate centres.

There are people who don't quite fit in the worlds of their origin, for whom someone from a different culture takes on added allure. And of course different classes in Britain are about as far apart in culture as you get.

Walter and Brandy really did get on very well. They made each other laugh. They shared some passion. They loved playing with new people like a pair of kittens. They shared their truths and even the tiny hurtful ones served to bring them closer together.

More than anything else, they felt *genuinely* easy and relaxed in each other's company. Boring, but true.

The relationship changed Brandy's life.

For the first time, she experienced what it felt like to *want* to get married. She began to think positively about the use she and Walter could make of the money her father's trust would give them. Places they could go together. Things they could do.

Yet from the beginning, it was Walter who said again and again that it didn't matter.

"But don't you want to marry me?" she asked.

"Of course I do."

"Wouldn't you like to have money?"

"Of course, but it isn't possible now, is it? And I can't flog myself to death about something that isn't possible. I regret my marriage. There's nothing at this point in my life that I regret more. But what am I supposed to do?"

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For Walter it was a nightmare. When it got to two years living apart from a wife, a divorce was easy. But Walter knew he had a problem *now*.

"Take me to meet her. I'll talk to her," Brandy said. "I can be very persuasive."

"No. It won't do any good."

"Well, at least go talk to her again yourself. Maybe she's changed her mind."

"She never changes her mind."

"Maybe she's found someone, too."

"She won't have."

"Try!"

He said he would. He went to Brighton for a weekend. But when he came back he reported failure.

And slowly the impediment to their marrying became an obsession.

"We'll just have to kill her," Brandy said one day. "That's all there is to it."

Walter looked at her. "Jesus God!" he said.

"I . . . I haven't shocked you, have I? I didn't really mean it."

"You didn't shock me."

"You look shocked."

"What I am shocked about is that I didn't think of it before."

They didn't meet for a day. Each of them thought it through. Brandy found that, on balance, she wanted him to do it. Give the woman another chance, by all means, but if she kept on behaving as if Henry VIII hadn't sorted the divorce thing out a long time ago, well . . .

Brandy was used to finding ways to get what she wanted and that is not the kind of history that is easily set aside.

Walter realized that it would be the biggest thing he had ever tried to pull off. Yet the rewards, the potential rewards, were so great. Don't get him wrong. He was motivated foremost by love and would happily have waited for the money. But he knew that he was dealing with obsession, not practicality. Without marriage, he would surely lose Brandy.

When they met again they decided Walter should go to his wife—Gladys—one more time and ask if there was any way she could be brought around.

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"And if there isn't?" Walter asked. His heart was thumping wildly. Boring but true.

"Then do it, darling," Brandy said.

"All right," Walter said. "I will."

They looked at each other. They shared a bottle of moderately priced sparkling wine. They made love, which worked pretty well, though not as well as sometimes.

"I've thought it through carefully," Walter said later. "And to do it right, to be able to get away with it and to live with it afterwards, I will need two things from you."

Brandy's eyes opened wide. The idea that he would involve her in the mechanics of the process had never occurred to her. Surely it would be like Daddy and the septic tank, arranging for it to be emptied while she was out so when she came home at the appointed hour, the horrid smell was gone.

"I need you to understand," Walter was saying, "that it may take me some time to get things sorted out to be safe."

"Uh huh."

"And I need you, when it's over, to promise, *promise,* not to ask me any questions."

Brandy looked at him. "Is that . . . that it?"

"Yes."

"Oh darling," she said, and she rolled into his arms with relief and enthusiasm.

He mistook her meaning. He thought her enthusiasm was for the murder. He was rather surprised at the intensity of it, but grateful nevertheless.

Brighton, he thought. Brighton! If only Gladys had lived in Birmingham, or even here in London.

In the end Walter was away for more than six weeks. He moved, temporarily and very modestly, to Brighton and spent most of his time down there.

One night a week he spent in London, with Brandy, but Brandy did not take the duration of the ordeal well. A week or even two was, perhaps, to be expected. But more than a month!

She asked him no questions, but her discomfiture was evident. It began to occur to Walter that if something didn't happen soon, there would be no problem to solve. Love or no love, the relationship would be over. He felt clearly that his time was running out. That scared him more than he had ever been scared before.

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So one night Walter rang to say that he wasn't coming up as they had agreed.

"Why?" Brandy asked.

"Don't ask," he said.

Two days later Walter was back in London, bag and baggage. He stood at the door and when Brandy opened it, he handed her a Brighton newspaper. The newspaper had an article circled. The article was headed "Unidentified Woman's Body on the Beach."

Brandy handed the newspaper back to Walter. He accepted it, came into the flat, went to the kitchen, and burned it.

Then, in the living room, Brandy began to cry. It surprised them both.

She would not talk to him or let him touch her. What was happening was that she was growing up, a process neither of them could have anticipated.

Finally Walter pushed through her repelling arms and shook her.

"Say it isn't true!" Brandy wailed. "Say it isn't true!"

Walter stood and looked at her. His mouth went dry and his breathing quickened. All the usual boring things when someone is about to take a serious risk.

"Say it isn't true," Brandy demanded again.

"It isn't true," Walter said.

"What?"

"It isn't true. I lied to you."

Puffy-eyed and slightly crazed, Brandy looked at him.

"Get yourself ready for a shock," Walter said, as if she was going to feel what he had to say was worse than that he had murdered his wife for her.

"I lied to you," Walter said again.

"When?"

"The first moment we met," he said.

She blinked. Looked puzzled.

"You said I looked married. So I said I was but I wasn't."

"What?"

"I have never been married. It was something I made up."

"Made up?" She couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"I lied to you," Walter said again with force. "I lied. It was something I did in those days, when I met girls and they didn't mean anything. I lied to them. I told them I was married, that I couldn't get divorced. It kept life . . . simpler."

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Walter laughed. Brandy didn't.

"I don't mean to laugh," he said. "But it's ironic that by trying to make life simpler, all I did was make it so damn complicated."

"You *lied?* About being married?"

"That's right."

"And everything about your wife . . . wasn't true?"

"I know how you feel about telling the truth, Bran. I would not be saying these things to you if they weren't true. And I know what a chance I'm taking in telling you now. I know I am risking losing you."

"But," she asked, "what did you do in Brighton? And what about the body in the newspaper?"

"I decided that all I could do was go to Brighton and wait until there was an unidentified female body and then tell you it was my Gladys, and that I had killed her. But it took so long! Bloody Brighton! They just don't get that many bodies. You can't believe how many times I've regretted that I didn't place her somewhere they get more unexplained deaths. It was agonizing, waiting down there until . . . Until it happened."

"You didn't murder her?"

"No. There was no 'her' to murder."

"You were never married?"

"No."

"I can't believe that you *lied* to me."

"I hope that at least a part of you is pleased."

"I don't know what I feel."

Walter moved back from her. "I've done a bad thing, Bran. I know it will take you some time to think it through. And maybe you'll never want to have anything to do with me again. I'm going to go now. I'll stay with my mum. You have the number. If you want to see me again, ring me. Do you understand?"

She nodded.

"Please," he said, begging. "Please don't forget how good we've been together. It wouldn't be the same again right away, but I beg of you, give it a chance. I am telling the truth now. And I swear that I will never tell you another lie again for as long as I live."

Brandy took some time to sort things out in her mind.

He had lied to her, no question. What was hard to figure out was when. Had she been wrong when they first met, when she had seen intuitively that he was a married man? She hadn't been wrong often

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about that kind of thing. But was he lying now, then, to make her feel better?

She would make a phone call, all right. But to him, or to the police?

Walter, of course, hoped that the call would be to him. He *had* lied when they first met. The story he told Brandy about that day was true. In those days he routinely told his pickups that he was married, to keep them from expecting him to get involved. Unfortunately—well, fortunately really—Brandy was not a routine woman for him.

But he had also lied about what happened in Brighton. Except that he sorely regretted not moving Gladys to Birmingham or Liverpool or Glasgow, or how about New York. If she had been American and living in New York, he could have been rid of her overnight. Any night.

But he had gone for Brighton. And Brighton it had had to be. And it was Brighton where he had waited, waited, waited for the right kind of death. Waited till Brandy clearly would not have been able to take any more delay. And it was Brighton where Walter had murdered a stranger and pushed her into the sea.

Two days after Walter left her to think, Brandy reached for the telephone and dialled.

Under extreme pressure, people fall back on the attitudes and policies that have served them best over the years. Brandy, when it came down to basics, could not *bear* knowing she'd been lied to, even by Walter. When exactly the lie had taken place began to matter less. She telephoned Walter's number all right, but when his mother answered Brandy just left a message: "Tell him it's over."

Blotting out of her mind any attempt to deal with other moralities, Brandy went to a party.

In Brighton the police were making progress on the murder of Jeanette Simpson. Witnesses had seen a man talking to her the evening of her death, and careful legwork meant that a man with a London accent who had taken a cheap room for six weeks was being sought for questioning. But on the matter of a motive they were, thus far, completely at a loss.

"Q"

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a *NEW* Nick Velvet story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

A fine example of Ed Hoch's ingenious use of new concepts and inventions, this latest Nick Velvet adventure takes the likable thief-cum-sleuth to England, where he discovers that he is not the only one trying to steal an Old English sheepdog . . .

THE THEFT OF THE BARKING DOG

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Nick Velvet had come to England to steal a dog.

"It's no Hound of the Baskervilles," the woman in blue had told him. "If he didn't have those guards around his place I'd go after it myself. It's just a big Old English sheepdog named Rodney, the friendliest creature in the world."

"This Manuel Curzon is your former husband?" Nick asked, making notes as he spoke with Evita Curzon. She was a dark, Latin type with a slow, seductive smile.

"That's correct. Rodney should really be my dog, but Manuel won't give him up. He's being very unreasonable about the whole thing."

"My fee would be twenty-five thousand dollars plus travel expenses. Is Rodney worth that much to you?"

"That much and more."

Nick's original plan had involved a dog substitution—replacing Rodney with an identical pooch while he made his escape with the original. Using photographs of the sheepdog that Evita had supplied, he was about to purchase a passable substitute to accompany him to England when he learned about that country's rigid pet-quarantine laws. If he wanted to complete his assignment in a rea-

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sonable length of time, he would have to obtain a dog in England.

So Nick flew to London alone after kissing Gloria goodbye at the airport and promising to bring her back a gift. His first stop after checking into his Mayfair hotel and renting a car was a big kennel on the outskirts of the city. He asked about large Old English sheepdogs, but the only ones available were either too small or had the wrong coloring.

"He has to be grey and white, like the one in this picture," Nick told the young man in charge.

"Funny, there was someone here a few days ago asking for the same thing. In fact, he had a photo that could have been the same dog. He didn't care about the coloring, though, as long as the size was right. I'm supposed to call him if one turns up."

Nick found this extremely interesting, and possibly more than a coincidence. "Do you have the man's name handy?"

"I put his card in my drawer here. It should be near the top. Yes, here it is—Percy Apjohn. Lives in Wembley."

"Thank you," Nick said with a smile. "I'll contact him. If we're on the same mission we should pool our resources."

He tried phoning Apjohn's number, on the pretense of having a dog available, but there was no answer. Because Wembley was on the way to Manuel Curzon's home near Oxhey, he decided to swing by there first. Apjohn lived in a small detached house across from a neighborhood pub. When no one answered his ring, Nick crossed the street and ordered a pint from the bartender.

"I'm looking for Percy Apjohn," he said quietly. "Seen him around?"

"Not in a couple of days. That's odd for him. Usually stops in every night for his pint."

Nick finished the beer and recrossed the street. The little house seemed far too quiet, and he noticed something he'd missed earlier. There were two newspapers on the front stoop, half hidden by a flowering plant. He walked around to the rear of the house and used a credit card to force the bolt on the back door.

As soon as he stepped into the kitchen he caught the odor. It wasn't pleasant and he knew what it meant. The man's body lay halfway into the living room, in a pool of dried blood. He'd been dead for some time. The cause of death seemed to be a gaping wound in his throat. Nick hoped it had been caused by a weapon of some sort and not by a large, vicious dog. He glanced quickly around the room and noticed a business card on the table, from someplace called

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Essex Storage Facilities. He stuck it in his pocket, for no special reason.

He went out the way he'd come and cut across the back yards so no one from the pub would see him leaving. Finding a man's body wasn't the best way to start off an assignment, and he could only hope the two things were just coincidental. In any event, he would visit no more kennels for a time. The road to Oxhey lay just ahead.

Manuel Curzon was well known in this suburb of Greater London. He owned several acres of land along London Road and seemed to be well-off, though the people to whom Nick spoke were vague as to the source of his income. Pausing in his rental car along the side of the road, Nick affixed a large circular insignia to each of the two doors. They read: Oxhey Animal Control Unit. From a distance he thought they looked quite convincing.

Nick parked in the driveway of the Curzon home and walked up the stone path to the front door. His approach immediately set off the deep-throated barking of a large dog that was most likely to be Rodney. The door was not opened in response to his arrival. Instead, a broad-shouldered young man in a chauffeur's uniform appeared suddenly behind him. "Can I help you, sir?"

"I'm looking for Manuel Curzon. We've had a complaint about a barking dog." His words seemed to enrage Rodney even more, and the barking from within grew noticeably louder.

"Mr. Curzon doesn't receive visitors."

"I'll have to issue an official warning about the dog," Nick told him. "What's your name?"

"Gilligan, sir."

Nick's British accent was none too good, but he tried to act bureaucratic as he filled out an impressive-looking form and handed it to the man. "Well, Gilligan, here's a warning for your employer. If there are any more complaints I may be forced to confiscate—"

"What's this?" A young woman in jeans and a man's shirt had come around the corner of the house. "What's the trouble, Gilligan?"

"He's from animal control, Miss. There's been a complaint about Rodney's barking."

"I'll handle this."

Gilligan hesitated only a moment and then retreated. Nick faced the young woman and saw at once the familiar features and coloring of Evita Curzon, the woman who'd hired him. This could only be her daughter, and she quickly confirmed the fact. "I'm Mr. Curzon's daughter, Catherine. Can I be of help?"

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Nick waved the form at her. "Complaint of a barking dog."

"It couldn't be Rodney. He never disturbs anyone."

"Could I see your father?"

"He's— He's quite ill. He suffered a stroke last month."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Miss."

"He still can't speak, though the doctor thinks he'll improve somewhat." She hesitated and then decided. "You can see the dog if you'd like, though. I'm sure you'll agree that Rodney is a lovable animal."

She opened the front door and led him inside. The large sheepdog came bounding to her at once, his red tongue about the only thing visible through the coat of long white and dark-grey hair. She dropped to her knees and hugged him, then said, "Look, Rodney! Here's a nice man from the town come to see you, Mr.—?"

"Velvet," Nick supplied, taking in the expensive furnishings.

"Mr. Velvet likes big dogs, but he likes them best when they're a little bit quiet."

Rodney's answering bark did indeed seem to be a bit subdued. Nick patted him to show approval. "You behave yourself like a good dog," he cautioned, "and I won't have to give your mistress another warning."

As he straightened up, a framed photograph on the piano caught his eye. It was in among several family pictures and showed five men grouped around a red sports car. He'd never have noticed it except that the second man from the left was clearly Percy Apjohn, whose body he'd found and abandoned earlier that day. "Who are these handsome fellows?" he asked casually.

"Friends of my father's. That's him in the center." She eyed Nick a bit dubiously.

Nick studied the dark, pockmarked face. Even the smile Curzon allowed for the photograph with his friends seemed hasty and forced. Nick could understand why Evita Curzon might have found life difficult with such a man. He turned back to Catherine and said, "One of these men looks familiar. It's Percy Apjohn, isn't it?"

"That's right. He's been a dear through all of this, driving over frequently to visit my father."

"Do the others live around here?"

"Two of them do. The other, Matthew Kane, is out of the country somewhere. I don't even know if he's heard about Daddy's stroke."

"It almost looks as if they're a team of some sort, the way they're posed."

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She chuckled at that. "Hardly! Except for a little hunting, Daddy has never been a sportsman. The five of them used to get together to chat and play cards on Saturday nights. A few years ago they started to drift apart."

"Well, you will keep Rodney under control, won't you?"

"Certainly. Thank you for being so understanding, Mr. Velvet."

He went back to his car, aware that Gilligan's eyes were on him all the time. Still, if the chauffeur was the only guard to be overcome, it wasn't such a difficult job. Rodney could be in his hands by the next morning. He took a room at an inn for the night.

Evita Curzon had planned to arrive in London that evening and Nick phoned her hotel after dinner to inform her that Rodney would be delivered the following day. "I scouted out the place today and met your daughter."

"Catherine? How is she?"

"Better than your husband, apparently. Are you aware that he suffered a stroke last month?"

"I heard that, yes."

"But not from your daughter."

"It's not important who told me. Deliver the dog and you'll get your money."

"Do you know a friend of your husband's named Percy Apjohn?"

"I know him. I don't admire him."

"Why is that?"

"Look, Mr. Velvet, I hired you to do a job. You specialize in stealing items of little or no value and I'm paying you to get back my dog. It's all that need concern you."

"Of course. I do have one important question, though. Is Gilligan the only guard at the house?"

"Yes, but don't underestimate him. He says he killed a man once."

Or maybe twice, Nick thought, remembering Apjohn's body. "I'll be careful."

He hung up just as a knock sounded on the door. Thinking it might be the innkeeper, he opened the door without hesitation. A tall man with a vaguely familiar face hit him on the chest with the flat of his hand. "Inside, mister!"

A second man crowded in behind the first and Nick saw that he had little choice. The door was closed and he was alone with them. "Is this a robbery?" he asked, dropping all pretense of an English accent.

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"Not yet it isn't," the second man snarled. "And we're here to see it doesn't become one, Mr. Nick Velvet! Catherine Curzon phoned me. She said some animal control person called Velvet was at the house, acting a bit strange. Showed an interest in our picture, among other things."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Nick insisted, but he knew only too well. They were two of the group standing with Manuel Curzon in the photograph on the piano.

The tall one took a folded newspaper from his pocket. "Try to tell me this isn't you."

It was a full page ripped from a London tabloid dated nearly four years earlier. The story dealt with one of Britain's periodic great train robberies, in which a gang of thieves had held up a train in the north country and escaped with a fortune in bank notes. Nick's picture, somewhat fuzzy but still recognizable, was part of a sidebar article on great thieves. In fairness, the story admitted that he'd never been known to steal anything of value.

"That's me, all right," Nick agreed with a smile. "No doubt about it. But you have the advantage on me. Who are you?"

"Phil Banyon," the tall one said. "And this is Roger Green. What are you doing here?"

"I'm on holiday. What about you?"

"We both live in Oxhey. We're friends of Manuel Curzon and we're worried you've been snooping around there."

"Oh, hardly snooping around!"

"What would you call it, with that fake sign on the side of your car?" Green asked. "Oxhey doesn't even have an animal control unit."

"Then they might be willing to let me establish one."

Neither man smiled. Banyon's right fist shot out before Nick realized what was happening. It caught him on the tip of the jaw and sent him reeling backward onto the bed. He started to get up and the other one hit him.

Nick met Evita Curzon in London's Green Park the following morning as scheduled. She walked up to him, trim and proper in a tailored blue suit, and removed her sunglasses. "Where's Rodney?" she asked.

"I don't have him yet."

"Don't have him? Why not? What happened to your face?"

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"A couple of gentlemen visited my room last evening. We had a bit of a tussle and I'm afraid they won. I was dozing when they left and by the time I woke up it was too late to go after your dog."

"Who were these men?"

"A couple of your old friends—Banyon and Green."

"They were my husband's friends, not mine. What did they say to you?"

"They accused me of snooping around. Then they just started punching me."

"Yes, that sounds like them."

"Perhaps you should tell me what this is all about."

"I only hired you to steal my dog, Mr. Velvet. You needn't concern yourself with anything else."

"You didn't tell me about your daughter."

"Catherine's not involved in this."

Nick stared up at the trees. "Tell me one thing, Mrs. Curzon—how did you learn about me?"

"How—?"

"You sought me out and hired me. How did you hear about me here in England? Was it through a tabloid newspaper article? They showed me the article before they started punching me. One of those great train robbery things you Brits are so fond of."

She was silent for a moment. Finally she said, "You're right about the tabloid. That's where I first saw your name."

"Your husband and the others were especially interested in that article about the train robbery—interested enough to keep it for nearly four years. Could they be the ones who robbed the train? All five of them?"

"I don't know," she replied. "Certainly the thought has crossed my mind. The press agreed that the bandits would have to keep their loot hidden for years, until after the statute of limitations ran out. I saw no evidence of anything around the house."

"If your husband was the guardian of this money, his stroke might have made the others nervous." Nick had suddenly remembered something.

"I've no interest in train robberies," she insisted. "I only want to get my dog back."

"All right," he agreed.

"Tonight?"

"Tonight."

* * *

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But first Nick Velvet had another stop to make. He'd remembered the business card for Essex Storage Facility which he'd found on the table at Percy Apjohn's house. It might mean nothing, but if there was hidden loot a storage facility was certainly a likely hiding place. It was located closer in to London, not far from Apjohn's place in Wembley. When Nick reached the address, he found a long low building with a line of overhead doors, capable of storing motor vehicles if necessary. The painted sign on a side wall read: Essex Storage Facility–Key, Combination, and Voiceprint Locks Available.

Nick found the manager, a robust young man named Jennings. "I am making inquiries regarding the estate of Manuel Curzon," Nick said in his most officious banker's voice.

Jennings seemed surprised. "Has he died?"

"He's clinging to life since his stroke, but the family feels the need to make certain preparations for the inevitable."

"I see."

"We understand he maintains storage space with you."

"That's right. Comes down about every six months to check it over."

"How much can you tell me about what's kept in his space?"

"Nothing. Against the regulations, you see."

"You mean I'd have to have a key?"

"No, no—Curzon rents our top-of-the-line option. He has a voiceprint lock."

"Just what is that?"

"Sort of a computer thing, as I understand it. The client's voiceprint is kept in the memory and compared to a voiceprint of anyone trying to gain access. If they don't match, the door remains locked. We're one of the first facilities in the country to offer it."

"The speaker has to say a certain word or phrase?"

"That's the idea. There's a slight leeway for natural variations, but the voice has to be pretty much the same. Someone imitating the voice wouldn't know the secret phrase, of course."

"Well, that's part of the problem, you see. Curzon's stroke has robbed him of the ability to speak. It's doubtful that he'll ever recover."

"With the voice lock we insist on a second speaker for just that reason. In the event one person dies or is incapacitated, the second person can open the lock."

"Who was Curzon's second person?"

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"I have no idea. We only record the name of the primary leaseholder."

Nick sneaked a ten-pound note from his pocket and held it casually between his fingers. "It's important that we find this person."

"No chance, governor. I just don't know."

"What number is his unit?"

"The records will tell me that," he replied, his eyes on the banknote. "Come into the office."

He flipped through the pages of a loose-leaf record book. "Here it is—number sixty-five, around on the other side."

"Does it say what he stored?"

Jennings replied with some reluctance. "A Land Rover."

"That's all?"

"That's all he listed."

Nick nodded and handed over the ten-pound note. "Thank you, Mr. Jennings."

That night, after dark, Nick parked his car some distance from the Curzon estate. He carried a number of items with him, some clipped to a gadget belt around his waist. He was dressed all in black and even his flashlight had a black rubber casing. Crossing the yard toward the house, Nick was careful to avoid the obvious alarm systems. There was no sign of Gilligan patrolling the grounds, and he wanted to keep it that way.

It had been obvious on his earlier visit that Rodney spent the nights indoors. This was no animal to be relegated to a doghouse. Nick found some open ground-floor windows and taped small tubes of chemical scent to the sills. Wherever Rodney was, he would soon be getting whiffs of a female dog in heat.

Nick retreated to the road where he'd left the car. He was barely back to it when he heard the big sheepdog begin to bark. He stuck the animal control signs back on the sides of the vehicle and slipped on a tweed jacket that made him appear more businesslike. After ten minutes Rodney was still barking. He started the car and drove up to the house.

Before the car had come to a full stop, Gilligan was out the front door, a powerful Webley air pistol held at the ready. He was wearing a dressing gown, but it didn't seem to interfere with his aim as he leveled the weapon at the car. "Put that down!" Nick commanded in the most authoritative voice he could muster. "You're interfering with the Oxhey Animal Control Unit!"

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"Get off this property!"

"Not until I take that hound with me! He's disturbing the peace and quiet of the entire township."

Gilligan kept the pistol steady. Nick knew that British-made air pistols could be deadly, and he had no desire to test this one's velocity. At that instant, Catherine Curzon appeared in the doorway behind the chauffeur and snapped, "Put that weapon down, Gilligan! What's the meaning of this?"

"The dog—," Nick began, getting out of the car.

"I don't know what's wrong with Rodney," she said, truly distressed. "He's never behaved like this before."

Before they knew it, Rodney himself was on the scene, trailing a broken rope with which he'd been tied. Nick bent down and grabbed the rope, reining him in as he tried to escape out the front door. "I've got him," he announced. "I'll have to take him with me, I'm afraid. You can apply for his release tomorrow morning at the animal control center." By that time the dog would be in London with Evita Curzon and Nick would be counting his fee.

"Mr. Curzon would never let this happen," Gilligan said, anxious to use the weapon he still held.

Catherine walked up to him and placed her hand over the gun. "There'll be none of that. I don't know what your game is, Mr. Velvet, but I can see from your bruised face that you're a hard man to convince. I'll be on the phone to the animal control center first thing in the morning, and you'll be out of a job!"

Nick opened the rear door of his car. He'd left some of the chemical there to induce the dog in, and it offered no resistance. Then Nick got behind the wheel, handed Catherine Curzon an official-looking receipt for the dog, and drove away. Rodney gave a final bark from the back seat and then settled down in frustration.

The following morning, on a cool but sunny spring day, Nick Velvet took Rodney for a romp in Green Park. It was truly a magnificent sheepdog, attracting admiring glances from virtually everyone they passed. He'd expected his client to be there waiting and was mildly surprised when she was nowhere in sight. A smaller dog's approach brought a woof from Rodney, who was ready to give chase until Nick tugged on the leash.

Fifteen minutes later, he began to suspect she wasn't coming. Something had happened. Something Nick didn't know about. He pondered what to do next, saddled with a big friendly dog who liked to bark.

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"Mr. Velvet?"

Nick turned and saw a middle-aged man with a round face and thinning hair standing behind him. It was the fifth man from the photo at Curzon's house, the missing Matthew Kane. "Yes?" Nick replied, not showing any recognition.

"Evita couldn't make it. She sent me for the dog."

As if in understanding, Rodney gave a low but distinct growl. "Do you have the money?" Nick asked, tightening his hold on the leash.

"You're to see her for the rest of it. She just sent me for the dog."

"No deal."

The man's eyes hardened. "I have a gun in my pocket, Mr. Velvet. I won't hesitate to use it."

"Take me to her. Take me to Evita Curzon. As soon as I get the money, you get the dog."

"All right. No funny business."

"Which way are we going?"

"She's leasing a flat on St. James Street. It's only a block away."

Nick fully expected that the flat would yield Evita Curzon's dead body, and he'd be fighting for his life in a matter of minutes. Instead she opened the door when they arrived, smiling and seemingly quite healthy. "I should have known you wouldn't give up the dog without the balance of your money, Mr. Velvet. I was making travel arrangements."

"I was expecting you, not one of your ex-husband's friends."

"Oh? You know each other?"

"I saw his photograph at your old house. Matthew Kane, I expect, back from a long absence."

Kane and Evita exchanged glances. "I told you before that none of this concerned you," she told Nick. "You've delivered the dog and here's your money."

He accepted the envelope and did a quick count of the money. "Thank you," he said with a smile. "It's been a pleasure doing business with you, Mrs. Curzon. With both of you, in fact."

Rodney gave a final bark of farewell as he went out the door.

Nick Velvet should have headed for the airport and forgotten the whole thing. Percy Apjohn was dead, but that meant nothing to him. He hadn't even known the man, and the whole crowd of them might be train robbers for all he knew. It was odd he hadn't seen anything in the papers about Apjohn, but maybe the body hadn't yet been found.

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That was one thing he could do before he caught his plane. He'd drive up to Wembley, and if the body was still undiscovered he'd phone the police. Then he'd catch the next plane to New York. He stopped at a store and picked up some Waterford crystal for Gloria, then headed to Apjohn's house. It looked the same as it had two days earlier.

There was a man mowing the grass at the house down the street and Nick asked him, "Has Percy Apjohn been around lately? I have some business with him."

"He was there yesterday," the man replied. "I was talking to him. Did you try the bell?"

"Yesterday?" Nick wondered if his mouth was hanging open. "Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure! You think I'm feeble-minded or something? I say yesterday, I mean yesterday."

Nick went up to the door and rang the bell, half fearing that the corpse he'd seen would answer it. But no one came. He glanced back at the neighbor, waited until he pushed the mower around the side of the house, and then circled to the rear of Apjohn's house. He forced the bolt with the credit card as he'd done on his earlier visit.

This time it was different. This time there was no body in the living room doorway.

All traces of dried blood had been removed, and if there was any odor in the air it was the sweet smell of a strong disinfectant.

Nick thought about Percy Apjohn dead and Percy Apjohn back to life. He thought about Rodney and he thought about the photograph of those five men. Then he went back to his car and drove to Curzon's home in Oxhey.

For once he was greeted by someone other than Gilligan. Catherine Curzon herself answered the door and stepped aside to let him enter. "There is no Oxhey Animal Control Unit," she told him angrily. "Suppose you explain yourself!"

"I will, in due course."

"Where's Rodney?"

"First let me see your father."

"What? Are you crazy? My father's a sick man!"

"It's very important that I see him. I don't have to speak to him. I just have to see him. I can stand in the doorway of his room."

But she was firm in blocking his path. "You'd better tell me what this is all about."

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"It's about the great train robbery of four years ago. I believe your father and his four friends were involved in it. Your mother knew it, and I think you must have had your suspicions, too."

"Those men in the photograph are no longer close friends of my father's."

"There's a good reason for that. The loot from the train robbery is hidden away and everyone is lying low until the statute of limitations makes prosecution impossible. The conspirators seem to have split into three groups—Banyon and Green are still together, your mother seems to have taken up with Matthew Kane, and Percy Apjohn may or may not have been murdered."

"What?"

"I've seen the photograph and I've seen the people—all except your father, that is. I have only your word that he's still alive."

She bit her lip uncertainly and then turned toward the stairway. "Follow me, Mr. Velvet. Please try to be quiet."

She led him to an enclosed sun porch at the rear of the second floor. There, seated in a wheelchair with a blanket over his legs, was the fifth man in the photograph, Manuel Curzon. His head lifted as they entered and he tried to speak, but only jumbled fragments of sound came out.

"Are you satisfied now?" she asked Nick.

"I'm sorry. I had to be sure."

She led the way back downstairs. "Sure of what?"

"Did you know your father rents space at the Essex Storage Facility?"

"I never heard of it."

"He has a space the size of a small garage where he keeps a Land Rover."

"He used to have one years ago. I thought he sold it."

"The lock is controlled by a voiceprint."

"What's that?"

"A graphic representation of your father's voice, with the frequencies analyzed by a sound spectrograph. His voice, speaking some code word or phrase, was used to unlock the storage compartment."

"But he can't speak!"

"That's why his stroke threw the other four conspirators into a panic. He'd used someone else's voice as a backup, in case he died or was disabled, but none of them knew who it was."

"If what you say is true, he must have told someone."

"He did. He told your mother."

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* * *

Nick knew they'd be there ahead of him, and common sense kept telling him he was only looking for trouble by returning to the Essex Storage Facility. Still, he needed an ending when he told the story to Gloria back home.

This time he didn't stop at the office but swung his car around to the back of the building, to storage space number 65. Another car was already there, and he spotted Evita Curzon and Matthew Kane at once. They had the big sheepdog with them and Rodney gave a bark of recognition as Nick came forward.

"What are you doing here?" Evita Curzon asked. "You have your money."

"I had to see if this thing would really work," Nick said with a smile. "I never saw the barking of a dog open a voiceprint lock before."

Kane reached under his jacket and brought out a snub-nosed revolver. "I warned you earlier that I had a gun, Velvet. You should have stayed in London."

"Let's hurry," Evita urged. "Banyon and Green might show up any minute."

"I have to correct an earlier misstatement," Nick told the round-faced man. "I called you Matthew Kane, but of course you're really Percy Apjohn. You murdered the real Matthew Kane at your house in Wembley two days ago."

"You seem to know a great deal."

"I jumped to the wrong conclusion when I entered your house and found his body. But today I learned you were very much alive and at home yesterday. The body was gone, so you must have removed it and cleaned up. You must have killed him. It had to be Kane because everyone else in the photograph is accounted for—even Manuel Curzon, whom I saw for the first time today."

"How is he?" Evita asked.

"As advertised. He can't speak. That's why you needed Rodney, the back-up voice." A bark from Rodney, right on cue. "I should have known you two were in this together because what led me to Apjohn's house in the first place was a kennel owner who said I was the second person trying to buy an Old English sheepdog. Mr. Apjohn, he said, didn't care about the dog's coloring so long as the size was right. If the dog wasn't important for its looks, why was it important? I had no idea until I learned of this voiceprint business. It seemed likely that two sheepdogs of the same size might have the

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same tonal quality to their barks. But you couldn't find a suitable duplicate so I was hired to steal the original. If you both knew of Rodney's importance, I guessed you were working together, except that made it Evita and Apjohn, not Evita and Kane."

"Keep him covered," Evita told Apjohn. She took Rodney from the car and led him to the microphone mounted on the lock of the storage door.

Nick kept on talking. He always figured it was better to talk when a gun was pointed at him. "Matthew Kane heard about Curzon's stroke and came back from overseas. He wanted to make sure of his share of the loot. He confronted you at your house and you killed him, probably with a gardening tool. I don't know what you did with the body."

Apjohn chuckled. "You'll find out soon enough."

With a bit of urging from Evita, Rodney barked twice into the microphone. There was a distinct click as the mechanism unlocked. Evita opened the wide overhead door to reveal a dark-green Land Rover in fairly good condition. She dropped to the ground and pulled herself under the vehicle, starting to tear away pieces of tape from the undercarriage. "It's still here," she told Apjohn.

"Good!"

Bundles of plastic-wrapped currency began to litter the floor of the storage garage. "You're cutting the others out of this?" Nick asked.

"Damn right we are!" Apjohn hefted the gun. "But you're in for the same share as Kane. His body's wrapped in oilskin in the trunk of my car. You're both going in there, in place of the money. They'll find your bodies one of these years."

"A car's coming!" Evita warned.

Percy Apjohn cursed and swung around. Nick couldn't wait for a second chance. He was on the man in an instant, grabbing the gun and wrestling it away as they both toppled to the ground. Nick landed on top and the fight ended just as the car pulled up. It was Gilligan, the Curzon chauffeur.

"I was expecting Banyon and Green," Nick said, holding onto Apjohn.

"They've been delayed," Gilligan said. "They're cooperating with the authorities."

"What's the meaning of this?" Evita Curzon asked. "Are you still my former husband's chauffeur?"

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"Scotland Yard Special Branch," Gilligan told her. "We've been waiting four years for this day. We couldn't prove a thing until we found the money. Don't try to run. I'm not alone."

Nick saw the other cars converging on them then, and knew that his return home would be delayed by a few days. No one was likely to prosecute him for stealing a dog, though. He walked over and gave Rodney a friendly hug.

DETECTIVERSE

STICK-SHAFTED

by DIXIE J. WHITTED

Joe tried to drive the getaway car—
Sweated and strained, but didn't get far.
When the cops arrived, he made this admission:
"I'm used to an automatic transmission."

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a *NEW* short story by

BARBARA OWENS

"Why'd you stick in two pictures of him?" he asked, but before either detective could answer Gordy looked closer and whispered, shocked, "They're two different guys."

"That's right," Skovich said. "Take your time. Which one did you see . . . ?"

DEAD RINGERS

by BARBARA OWENS

Sue and Kenny waited in the car while Mick and Poppy dashed into the deli for chips. Too young to buy beer, they'd lifted two six-packs from Mick's dad's plentiful supply and were ready to party. It was getting late; the parking lot was almost empty. They both heard the shots—pop pop pop—and Kenny said, "What the—" just as some guy backed out of the liquor store three doors down. His head turned, and for a second it seemed that he looked straight at them. Sue and Kenny hit the floor and stayed there.

While some old guy fingered through magazines, probably wouldn't even buy one, Gordy Russell wandered to the front window of the 7-Eleven store. Man, he hated this night job. What he wouldn't give to be home with his new wife in front of the TV. Nothing going on outside—dead, dead. Sounds from the liquor store next door, faint ones, like champagne corks shooting, then someone backed out of its door not ten feet from where Gordy stood. A man. Something covered his head to his eyebrows, and he held a gun. He didn't see Gordy, but Gordy's shock of recognition made him blurt out, "Hey!" The old guy at the magazines said, "You talkin' to me?" Then the window was empty and Gordy was running for the phone.

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Mick kept trying to hurry Poppy along. She'd already made him drive across town because this particular deli stocked her favorite chips, now she was hanging around talking to the girl behind the counter. Just as he finally got her out the door, the sound of heavy footsteps swiveled both their heads left. A man dressed all in black was running along the sidewalk away from them. Just before he disappeared around the corner of the liquor store, he looked back, right at them. It happened so fast that Mick and Poppy didn't have time to move—they just stood and watched him go.

When the young 7-Eleven clerk pounded past him, Sam Woodard looked up from his magazine. "Something going on?" He got no answer, so he made his old man's slow way to the front window and looked out just in time to see an aging panel truck screech out of the parking lot, almost hitting an oncoming car. Sam's eyes followed the truck until it passed under a streetlight. It was pretty far by then, but he stared at the driver's shadowed shape anyway.

Mrs. Edna Crawford was relieved to be heading home after a long evening. Much as she enjoyed her grandchildren, their constant noise and energy always left her with a nasty headache. She felt a little uneasy; it was too late for a woman her age to be out alone in the streets. Just as she was passing a scruffy little shopping strip, a panel truck shot out into her path. She had to stand on the brakes. Her old Chevy's rear end slid around until its nose pointed at the curb. The truck's driver didn't even look her way, but she got a clear view of his profile before he tore off down the street like someone was after him. Whispering comfort to herself, Edna pulled alongside the curb. She'd sit a few minutes, just to quiet her nerves.

Jaydeen Russo hadn't noticed the panel truck sitting in the back shadows of the lot until she was safely parked beside the dim shoulder of the liquor store. Satisfied the truck was empty, she decided to stay put. She was already breaking out in goosebumps. Tonight would be her first experience with adultery. Joey was out of town—again—and her boss at the collection agency had finally worn down her resistance. They were to meet there, then he'd drive her to his place. Jaydeen was enjoying a guilty little fantasy when the sound of shots registered, but she didn't fully rouse until someone came running around the corner of the liquor store. Oh God, a man with a gun, stuffing something into his jacket pocket. And he was headed straight for her. Jaydeen threw herself prone across the front seat. She was going to die. Footsteps, right outside her window, and a man's voice: "What the hell happened?" With both hands over her

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ears, she waited to be shot. And waited. Finally she lifted her hands. Steps, still close by, then the panel truck roared to life and sped away. Jaydeen sat straight up and reached for the ignition key. Something had happened, but she couldn't be found here. Joey would kill her. Lights out, her little Honda slunk out a back exit onto a dark street and headed for home.

The vultures were already gathering when Detectives Hank Skovich and Terry Hacker slid into the parking lot of a decaying strip mall. The liquor store at one end was cordoned off, with rubbernecks pressed as close as they were able and more still streaming across the asphalt. Hacker made a soft sound of disgust.

Inside the cramped store, the partners pushed through officers on the scene for a quick look at the body lying behind the counter.

"Two to the head," Skovich was informed. "Register's empty. He had a police call button under the counter, but he never made it."

"Any idea how much was taken?" Skovich asked.

"Not until the daughter gets here. This was her night off. Tomorrow being St. Patrick's Day, could've been a good haul."

Another officer drew Skovich aside. "You've got witnesses next-door. Clerk there says he recognized the shooter."

Hacker stayed at the scene. The witnesses had been herded into the back of the 7-Eleven; Skovich called them into the manager's office one at a time. The shaken clerk gave his name as Gordon Russell.

"I know him. I mean, I don't know him, but I've seen him around. Name's Wayne something—Dicky or Ducky, some weird name. Dicey, that's it, Wayne Dicey. Sometimes he drives an Al's Furnace Repair truck."

"You positive on him?" Skovich asked.

Gordy Russell mopped his sweaty face. "Listen, he was just on the other side of the window. I could see him plain as you."

Skovich wrote down the description: white male, mid-twenties, a couple of inches over six feet, 170 pounds. Roundish face, dark eyes. Had something covering the top of his head, but Wayne Dicey's hair was black and curly. He wore dark pants, navy or black windbreaker, dark gloves, and dirty white running shoes. Gordy didn't know guns.

"All I know is it was a handgun. And I think it was smoking."

Skovich grinned inside, but he wrote it down. "You know the old man ran the store?"

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"Mr. Rosen? Sure. Nice old guy. Look, is that all? Can I go home now?"

"One last thing. Any idea how much might have been in the till?"

Gordy shook his head. "We've all been robbed before, so none of us usually keep much. But he's been busy all week with St. Patrick's Day. Could've been a full bank."

Just then a stout older woman with pink-rimmed glasses appeared in the doorway.

"If you don't mind, detective, could you talk to me next? My name is Mrs. Edna Crawford. It's way past my bedtime, and you may not know it but I have bad nerves."

By the time Terry Hacker made his way to the 7-Eleven, all witnesses had been released and Skovich was going over his notes.

"I've got three shots," he said.

Hacker slumped into a chair. "Right, they found one in the wall, a .22. Victim was Peter Rosen. The daughter says there may have been a thousand or more in cash."

"Okay," Skovich said. "We've got a positive on a Wayne Dicey, may work for Al's Furnace Repair."

"Everybody recognize him?"

"Just one. Rest of the descriptions are in the ballpark. Except for two wild hairs. Mrs. Edna Crawford says the killer was dripping with blood, and Mr. Sam Woodard tells me he was black. Says they all are, aren't they?"

Hacker grinned. "Then let's haul Wayne in. Looks like this could be an easy wrap."

The police got Wayne Dicey out of bed. He was slumped over the table with a cigarette when Skovich and Hacker entered the stuffy little interrogation room. Skovich sat down facing him; Hacker leaned against the wall at Wayne's back.

Dicey was wearing faded jeans, a striped pullover, and scuffed brown boots. His curly black hair was on the shaggy side, and he looked more confused than defensive. He turned down Skovich's suggestion that he have a lawyer present, and when he was told why he'd been brought in for questioning, he frowned.

"Look, I know you hear this all the time, but you don't want me. I wouldn't do anything like that."

Skovich smiled a gentle smile. "Then there's a problem here, Wayne. We've got a witness who recognized you."

Wayne flushed. "Uh-uh. Not me."

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"We can hold you until we're satisfied one way or the other," Skovich told him. "Sure you don't want a lawyer now?"

Their suspect was looking even more confused. "But I haven't done anything. I don't know any lawyers, and I couldn't afford one if I did."

At a nod from Skovich, Terry Hacker ambled from the room.

"He's gone to get a public defender for you," Skovich explained. "So we won't talk any more until he gets here, okay?"

"If you say so." Dicey sounded sullen. "But you guys are making a big mistake."

While Wayne waited alone in the interrogation room, Skovich went over his notes again. Hacker checked Records, and he came back with a folder in his hand and an odd look on his face.

"The kid's clean, but I found a sheet on Walter Dicey. Lightweight, mostly—petty theft, public nuisance. A stolen car against him in juvie. Last known address is the same as Wayne's."

"Yeah?" Skovich said. "So?"

"Well, here's something interesting. Look."

He laid a mug shot on Skovich's desk, and when Skovich looked at it he felt a warning twinge in his gut. "I'll be damned," he said softly. "Twins?"

"Could be, couldn't they? But Walter's four years older. Kind of gives you the jumps, though, doesn't it?"

When the public defender arrived and the questioning resumed, Wayne told them he'd been home alone all evening working on his car in the garage. He didn't know if anyone could vouch for that, but the garage door had been open so someone might have seen him. Sure, he owned dark pants and white running shoes. Who didn't? However, he didn't own a panel truck, a dark windbreaker, or a gun.

Skovich was conscious of an increasingly urgent message from his gut. After sixteen years on the force, he'd learned to trust the twisting of his insides, and something was not right here. He began to wonder if this was going to be an easy wrap after all.

On an impulse, he asked Wayne if he lived alone.

"I rent the house," was the answer, "but my brother Walter stays with me sometimes."

The detectives exchanged looks. "He staying with you now?" Hacker asked.

"Yeah, for a couple of weeks back."

"Could Walter swear where you were tonight?"

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Wayne shook his head. "He plays poker Friday nights. I haven't seen him since I left for work this morning."

Skovich fell silent. Then, "Okay, here's what's going to happen. We're holding you overnight." He raised a hand against Dicey's protest. "We've got a witness, remember? For now, that's the way it has to be."

After Wayne was led reluctantly away, Skovich and Hacker shared one last cup of coffee.

"We've got to re-check the witnesses," Skovich announced finally. "But my gut says he didn't do it. I don't think he's smart enough. What do you think?"

Hacker yawned. "I'd like to dig into the brother, but right now I want to go home to bed. They're really spooky, though. Damn near dead ringers."

Skovich's gut sent out an alarm. "Damn near," he acknowledged grimly. "We'll let the witnesses decide."

Armed with pictures of both brothers, Skovich and Hacker set out early the next morning with a photo lineup of eight men. They met with Gordy Russell first, and Skovich's gut was tap dancing before they were finished. Gordy picked Wayne's picture immediately, but when his eyes slid over the others they stopped at Walter's and he looked again.

"Why'd you stick in two pictures of him?" he asked, but before either detective could answer Gordy looked closer and whispered, shocked, "They're two different guys."

"That's right," Skovich said. "Take your time. Which one did you see?"

Gordy took his time. Finally, he looked up with hope in his eyes. "I saw the one works for Al's Furnace Repair."

Skovich popped an antacid. "Well, it seems they both do—Wayne full-time, the other one when he runs out of money. Come on, Gordy, can you be sure?"

Russell had begun to sweat. "I think it was Wayne because his face is rounder. And the hair—it was longer, like his."

"You said he had something on his head," Hacker reminded him. "How much hair could you see?"

Gordy thought a minute. "Not much," he admitted.

"We're not trying to be tough on you," Skovich said. "We've just got to be sure. Think it would help if you saw them both in the flesh?"

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Gordy pulled his eyes away from the pictures. "It might. Honest, I was positive, but now . . ."

The four teenagers hadn't seen the gunman that clearly. Kenny Curtis saw only his back before diving to the floor of the car, but he was sure the guy was over six feet. Walter Dicey was 5'10". Kenny remembered the white running shoes. Sue Meecham agreed on the height, but she couldn't remember the color of his shoes. Poppy Haggerty and Mick Larson both thought he was under six feet, but he was running, so it was difficult to say. Poppy remembered only that he looked evil; Mick thought it was a ski mask, not a stocking cap, he was pulling off his head. Both identified the panel truck as old—Mick said it was grey or dark blue.

Mrs. Edna Crawford repeated that the man she saw was covered with blood, so how could she be certain what he looked like? She thought the truck was dark in color, and there might have been a "2" in the license number, but maybe not. Her nerves were all on edge, after all, being run off the road like that.

Sam Woodard said the truck was black and so was the man inside.

They all agreed to participate in a lineup—Poppy thought it sounded bitchin'. Skovich and Hacker set out to check alibis.

It turned out that three people saw Wayne Dicey working on his car all evening—a neighbor walking his dog, a babysitter being delivered to her home next door, and the babysitter's father. They all knew Wayne and could see him clearly. Yes, they knew Walter, too, and they hadn't seen him. What kind of car did Walter drive? An old Ford sedan, rusty tan.

"Okay, on to Walter," Skovich concluded. "I'm beginning to fall in love with Walter."

Walter Dicey played poker Friday nights at Jimmy and Reese's place, a second-floor apartment in a neighborhood that couldn't even remember better days. Jimmy and Reese said Walter had been there until daylight—he'd wanted to quit earlier, but they wouldn't let him because he was winning. The occupant of the first-floor apartment beneath theirs saw Walter arrive and verified the game.

"I don't sleep Friday nights with all the noise going on up there. How many times have I called you guys about it and you don't do a damn thing?"

Neither Reese nor Jimmy owned a panel truck.

With dimming spirits, the partners went back to the department. Inside the door, Skovich almost grabbed a man walking out. For a frozen second he thought he saw Wayne breezing towards freedom,

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but something stopped him. Instead, he accosted the clerk on the desk. "Who was that just walked out of here?"

The clerk flinched and quickly checked his log. "Name of Ray Dicey. He came to visit a cousin, Wayne. He was cleared okay, Hank."

Hacker was staring after the departing cousin. "My God, what have those Diceys got, an assembly line? Did you see that?"

Snarling, "I saw it," Skovich flung himself at his desk. Everything about this case was beginning to rub him the wrong way. He started to pitch his phone messages into the circular file when his eye caught one marked urgent. A Jaydeen Russo might know something about the liquor store holdup last night. Skovich salvaged the message and made the call.

Mrs. Russo apologized for leaving the scene, but she didn't know at the time that someone had been killed. She would talk to the police only if she was promised that her name wouldn't get out. She had her reasons, she said.

"I got a fair look at him in the light at the corner of the store," she said. "And I heard him say, 'What the hell happened?' I might be able to recognize his voice."

Skovich straightened, a ray of hope brightening the air around him. They agreed for Hacker to meet with her while Skovich rounded up Walter Dicey.

"It's time," Skovich said softly. His gut rolled. "I want to take a look at Walter Dicey."

The resemblance between the brothers was pronounced but not absolute, Skovich decided. The older brother was a few inches shorter, his face more sharply featured, and his bearing cockier—he moved with an arrogance that Skovich was all too quick to recognize. Every petty punk on the street affected it. Still, it was uncanny. Anyone who knew them well would have no difficulty telling them apart, but a casual observer, seeing them from a distance, could easily be confused.

Walter was also smarter than his younger brother. He immediately demanded a public defender and would say no more until one arrived. Once the questioning began, he was excessively polite, seemingly anxious to cooperate, but his eyes mocked the detectives and they all knew it. Within the first ten minutes of interrogation, Skovich's gut was jumping, pointing: That's him, that's him.

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"I'd help you if I could, officer," Walter said earnestly, a smile twitching at the corners of his mouth. "I've just got to be careful. You guys have burned me before. But I didn't do it, and if you knew my brother you'd know he didn't either."

"We've got eyewitnesses," Skovich reminded him.

Walter shrugged. "Hey, it happens all the time. Witnesses make mistakes."

Hacker rapped at the door. Skovich excused himself and went out into the hallway.

"The Russo woman thinks it was Wayne," Hacker told him. He quickly ran down her account of the sighting, the footsteps, the truck pulling away. "But after she saw Walter's picture, she's got doubts. How's it going in there?"

"I'm convinced this one did it," Skovich said. "Proving it is something else."

Hacker followed him back into the interrogation room. Skovich was silent for a moment, presenting a face filled with helplessness for Walter to see.

Finally, he said, "Walter, I'm going to ask a favor. Your alibi checks out, so I can't hold you. But I sure hate to see Wayne go down for something he might not have done. Would you be willing to go into a lineup with him? If my witnesses can't be positive they saw Wayne, that's going to help him, you understand?"

For a moment Walter didn't answer, his eyes reading Skovich's face. His young lawyer leaned close to whisper in his ear.

"Walter, he's your kid brother," Skovich pressed gently.

Walter shrugged. Grinned. "Sure, why not?" he said. The public defender frowned.

The lineup featured four police officers and the two Dicey brothers. The Diceys were positioned with only one man between them so that witnesses would be seeing them almost side by side. Somehow Skovich had neglected to inform either Walter or his attorney that some witnesses thought they might have seen Walter instead of Wayne.

Off the streets for the day, both detectives dressed casually. Hacker manned the phone to line up officers while Skovich escorted witnesses, one by one, into the viewing room with its one-way glass window.

Sweating profusely, Gordy Russell stared silently while each man stepped forward, turned, stepped back. Each wore a dark stocking

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cap, removed it, put it back on. Gordy's eyes flickered between Walter and Wayne.

"I still think it's Wayne," he said finally. "The way he stands, shoulders kind of stooped, like taller guys do. See how Walter stands straight up with his chest out? The guy I saw stood like Wayne." Nervously, he wet his lips. "But they're so close. I'm sorry, I just can't be sure."

"Okay," Skovich said through a mouthful of antacid tablets. "Thanks for trying."

Sue Meecham and Kenny Curtis still believed the man they saw was taller than Walter, but there'd been nothing that night to compare his height to, so they could be mistaken. It was one of the brothers, they concluded, but they didn't know which one. Mick Larson leaned toward Walter, but he was insistent that the man wore a ski mask, not a stocking cap. Poppy Haggerty couldn't identify anyone—no one in the lineup looked that evil.

Mrs. Edna Crawford took two steps into the viewing room, stopped, and began a high thin wail. "No, no, this isn't fair! I was led to believe the man couldn't see me. I didn't know we'd be in the same room. I can't, I can't do this!" Her trembling finger pointed to Terry Hacker, in his worn jeans and running shoes, seated on the stool by the phone.

For a long moment the detectives simply stared at her. Then Skovich took her gently by the arm.

"Mrs. Crawford, that's Detective Hacker, my partner. He was with me when you looked at pictures, remember?"

Finally convinced, hand pressed against her heart, she was unable to identify any of the six men in the lineup. She was sorry, but the face she saw had been too bloody. With a last dark glance at Hacker, she fled.

After one quick glance, Sam Woodard, the 7-Eleven customer, shook his head. "None of 'em. They're all white."

Skovich got his first look at Jaydeen Russo when she crept into the viewing room behind oversized dark glasses. Once again assured of anonymity, she scrutinized each man as he presented himself and listened as each repeated loudly, "What the hell happened?"

"I'm almost sure I saw Number Five," she said finally. Wayne Dicey was Number Five. "He's about the right size and his voice sounds close to the one I heard." She paused, biting her lip. "But Number Three looks so much like him. It could have been Number Three." Walter.

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The frustrated detectives retired to the squad room to swill coffee and evaluate the status of their case.

"How about lie detector tests?" Hacker suggested hopefully.

"Wouldn't stand up," Skovich said glumly, "and I doubt Walter would go for it. He's too smart. Damn it, Terry, we've got to let them both walk."

Basically, they had next to nothing. Witnesses had folded, a search of Wayne's house had turned up no identifiable clothing, no guns, no trace of an old panel truck. Breaking down alibis was about all that was left.

Skovich sighed. "Ever find out why the Russo woman is so afraid someone will know she was there?"

Hacker grinned. "My guess is she was meeting someone she wasn't supposed to. She said her husband was out of town."

Despite the situation, Skovich grinned back. "And she ends up flat out on the front seat of her car in the middle of shots, voices, and getaway footsteps. I'd say that evening was a bust."

Hacker swung his legs down from his desk. "Well, I'd better move Wayne's goodbye papers along. And it looked so simple at first."

Skovich didn't respond. Something had just triggered in his head. He pulled out Jaydeen Russo's statement, read it, then read it again. "Hold on a minute," he announced suddenly. "The footsteps. There's too many."

"What?"

Skovich lunged to his feet. "I want to see those guys together before we let them go. I'll fill you in, but don't let them out of here just yet."

"But, Hank, we can't hold them. Wayne's paperwork is already started."

"Then lose it," Skovich snapped. "It happens. I've got to try something first."

Walter Dicey was not happy when he was brought back into the interrogation room where Skovich and Hacker waited.

"Remember, Walter's the smart one," Skovich said just as the door opened.

Two detectives, two attorneys, and both brothers filled the little room. Walter Dicey was wearing a little sneer. He scarcely glanced at Wayne sitting close beside him.

"Look," he said, all previous signs of cordiality gone, "I did you guys a favor, but it's over. You haven't got a case and that means we go. Neither one of us has to talk to you."

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Skovich ignored Wayne, focusing instead on Walter's tight, unfriendly face. "You don't have to talk to me. I'll do the talking. I've got this idea, Walter. I want to run it by you, see what you say."

Walter folded his arms and leaned back in his chair. "Save your breath. I don't intend to say anything." But there were sweat beads gathering at his hairline.

"Suit yourself," Skovich said. "But hear me out anyway. See, I believe you're the one we want, Walter. The big brother, the boss. The one with the rap sheet. Here you are, you don't work steady, but you manage to have money to play poker every week. See how easy it would be to pick you as the logical suspect in a holdup? I see it like this: you pick an out-of-the-way liquor store just before a boozy holiday and you hit it late at night. In, out, and gone. Easy. Good thinking, Walter, damn good. Should have worked."

He stared into Walter's flat, wary eyes. "Only one thing doesn't make sense to me." Without turning his head, he asked, "What were you supposed to be doing, Wayne?"

And Wayne Dicey, leaning into, caught up in the scenario, answered quickly, "Nothing. Just wave a gun around and look tough. But, damn, I didn't know he was gonna shoot the guy."

Both lawyers, babbling instructions, shot to their feet. Walter Dicey's face went slack; his eyes widened. And slowly, with a big smile, Skovich turned to acknowledge Wayne. "Thank you, Wayne." Wayne, still blissfully unaware of what had just happened, smiled back.

"Too many footsteps," Skovich told Walter. "That's what finally hit me. We got a witness, hiding, heard steps, covered her ears, and someone was still running close by when she uncovered them. Had to be two men, first one, then the other, just seconds between. What happened, Walter? Wayne here lose it after that first shot? I bet he ran while you finished the guy off."

Instead of answering, Walter turned glittering eyes on his brother. "You jerk," he said quietly. "You stupid, dumb jerk."

Finally Wayne realized what he'd done. He looked stricken. "But you said nobody'd get hurt," he insisted in a thin voice.

Mottled red was rising from Walter's collar. "The guy was going for a gun, you idiot. He was reaching under the counter."

"That's where you made your mistake," Skovich broke in. "Turned a holdup into murder. Mr. Rosen didn't have a gun. He was going for the police call button."

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"Whatever." Walter jerked his head toward his brother. "I should've known better. My brother's stupid. Couldn't even pull the damned mask all the way over his head—stood there looking like Mickey Mouse. Good thing he didn't panic and use the gun. Prob'ly would've shot himself."

Walter sighed. "Or me."

Skovich nodded. "Then why take him? You'd have been better off alone."

"You're telling me." There was a hint of the old bravado in Walter's weak grin. "Thought I could teach him something. There's better ways to live than fixing furnaces. And he's a good driver. With him along, I could stay hid in the back of the truck."

"Well, you sure shook our witnesses," Skovich said. "We thought we had Wayne cold until your face showed up. You split just far enough apart that some of them saw Wayne and some saw you. Whole thing makes sense now."

Walter's grin widened. "Once I figured that out, I thought we'd both get off. Didn't sound like anybody knew there was two of us. Want to know something funny? Me and Wayne don't think we look that much alike, but we did rig a ringer for you."

And Wayne again volunteered helpfully, "That was our cousin Ray working on my car."

Ray Dicey. Skovich had almost accosted him in the lobby because he thought he was Wayne. "Good joke," he said through tight lips.

"Yeah, on us." Walter shook his head. "How could I know what would happen? Seemed like a good idea at the time."

"So cousin Ray was in on the take. And your poker buddies, Jimmy and Reese?"

Apparently willing to give it all up, Walter stretched his legs and smirked. "They didn't lie about me being there. They just forgot to tell you that I didn't stay."

"And I'll bet one of them has access to an old dark-colored panel truck," Skovich prompted.

Walter shrugged and said nothing.

Terry Hacker stirred against the wall. "Where's the clothes you wore? The guns?"

"All over town," Walter said. "Took apart and spread everywhere. You'll never find all of it."

"And the money?"

"Gone, man." Walter looked sad. "It don't last long."

"Well," Skovich said, "you won't need it now. Bye, boys."

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The Dicey brothers and their befuddled lawyers were taken away. It was over.

Left alone in the interrogation room, the partners lit cigarettes and shared a triumphant grin.

"This will be one to remember," Hacker said. "You know, Hank, when you first started quacking to me out there about too many footsteps, I thought you'd gone over. You're smarter than you look. So, how's the old gut now?"

"Feeling fine, real fine." Skovich patted his belly and threw a long arm over Hacker's shoulder. "In there just purring like a kitten, thank you. Isn't it your turn to pop for lunch?"

DETECTIVERSE

HIGH AND DRY

by LINDA PINCKNEY FENN

Fred perfected his plans on a Sunday,
And knocked off two banks on that Monday.
  But his plans came to naught,
  For he quickly was caught:
He'd neglected to gas up his Hyundai.

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

Ever since Edgar Allan Poe based his third Dupin short story, "The Mystery of Marie Roget" (1842), on the murder of Mary Rogers, mystery writers have been producing fictional solutions to real-life crimes. But as far as I know, *Solved* (Carroll & Graf, $21.95), edited by Ed Gorman and Martin H. Greenberg, is the first original short-story anthology entirely devoted to such attempts. I don't know (and am not likely ever to know) how many if any of these writers have hit upon a correct or even a possible solution to the problems they address, and only some are really trying to, but their stories are consistently diverting. Apart from expected classic cases like Jack the Ripper (treated with a completely appropriate feminist slant by Barbara Paul) and the Lindbergh kidnapping (looked at from a fresh viewpoint by William H. Hallahan), there is a political angle to many of the mysteries addressed, beginning with the lead story wherein David Everson's Illinois private eye Robert D. Miles considers a provocative theory of the identity of Deep Throat. Two of the politically charged tales, one from the right (by William DeAndrea) and one from the left (by Barry N. Malzberg), illustrate a minor problem with the book: the packaging dictates that the subject of the story be identified immediately, on the back jacket and in the introductory notes, even when the story owes some of its effectiveness to surprising the reader with what mystery is being addressed.

Two specialists in solving historical mysteries fictionally have new books, one a collection of stories addressing twentieth-century cases, the other a novel set in eighteenth-century France.

*** Max Allan Collins: *Dying in the Post-War World: A Nathan Heller Casebook,* Foul Play/Countryman, $19.95. Collins's Nate Heller private eye series has fictionalized true crime cases in a fine series of novels. Now the Chicago dick's five short-story appearances have been gathered along with the previously unpublished title novella, based on Chicago's Lipstick Killer crimes of the mid-forties. One of the stories concerns Eliot Ness's search for Cleveland's Mad Butcher of Kingsbury Run, later to be addressed at greater length (without Nate Heller) in the novel *Butcher's Run* (Bantam, 1988). (Collins's fans should also watch for *Tough Tender* [Carroll & Graf, $4.95], an omnibus edition of two of the author's Nolan novels, *Hard Cash* and *Scratch Fever* [both 1982], with a new introduction.)

** P.C. Doherty: *The Masked Man,* St. Martin's, $16.95. Dumas's Man in the Iron Mask was not a fictional creation but a real historical mys-

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tery, and English rogue Ralph Croft is sprung from the Bastille and given the job of discovering the closely-guarded prisoner's identity at a time when some of those involved with the puzzle are still alive. There's some stilted prose and narrative and awkward exposition here, but history buffs should enjoy it. And the final surprise is very nicely managed.

**** James Thurber: *Thurber on Crime,* Mysterious, $18.95. Editor Robert Lopresti gathers for the first time in one place the great *New Yorker* writer and cartoonist's criminous works, most from earlier Thurber volumes with a handful previously uncollected. Slightly more than half the contents are fictional—including such well-known and distinctive stories as "The Catbird Seat" and "The Remarkable Case of Mr. Bruhl," parodies of James M. Cain, W.R. Burnett, Horatio Alger, and the Sam Spade radio show, a sprinkling of fables, and "The Macbeth Murder Case," in which a mystery buff considers what was *really* going on in Shakespeare's play. The balance is made up of a strong selection of cartoons, true-crime accounts (concerning the Hall-Mills and Becker-Rosenthal cases), excerpts from Thurber's Harold Ross biography, *The Years with Ross,* and informal essays. Despite the superficial similarity of subject matter, the collection demonstrates the full range of the versatile Thurber's talents. Donald E. Westlake provides an introduction. One mild complaint: it would have been helpful to have dates of first appearance for each entry, especially the non-fiction pieces.

**** Ann Perry: *A Dangerous Mourning,* Fawcett Columbine, $18. Inspector Thomas Monk, the 1850s London cop introduced in *The Face of a Stranger* (1990), returns, still afflicted with amnesia, to investigate the murder of the daughter of a prominent London family all too eager to pin the crime on a burglar or (failing that) one of the servants. Pioneering nurse Hester Latterly continues her prickly relationship with Monk and helps with the investigation when her over-professionalism loses her a hospital job. This is a fine novel, both intricately plotted and, through the involving problems of its central characters, able to carry its 300-plus page length better than the first in the series. Perry is one of the very best current practitioners of the genre.

*** Peter Corris: *O'Fear,* Doubleday/Perfect Crime, $15.00. Sydney private eye Cliff Hardy looks into the apparently accidental death of an old friend, who left him $10,000 for the purpose, and becomes closely involved with the widow. (He's a much nicer guy than that makes him sound, by the way.) In the tradition of his American counterparts, Hardy narrates a smooth, fast-reading, enjoyable case in standard P.I. prose with the Australian background an added bonus.

*** Peter Corris: *Man in the Shadows and Other Stories,* Bantam, $3.99. Equally enjoyable at less than book length, Hardy recounts

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the title novella and six shorter tales in solid style, though the obligatory action scene in each story gives them a more formulaic feel. Since Australian first-person narration sounds much more American than British, it takes statements like this to remind you you're reading about an alien culture: "Everyone could remember the moment of the cloudburst the way you can remember what you were doing when Kerr sacked Gough" (page 90). Much of the attraction of Hardy's cases lies in the fact that they apparently have *not* been specially edited for American readers.

*** Catherine Aird: *The Body Politic,* Doubleday/Crime Club, $15.00. It's appropriate that one of the last books published under the venerable Crime Club imprint is by one of its stalwarts of recent years. Aird and her provincial police inspector C.D. Sloan first appeared with the similarly punning *A Religious Body* (1966), and this is her fourteenth in the line. (The author note says tenth, but publishers are often careless about such statistics.) The complex plot, involving local Members of Parliament from opposing parties, a medieval battle reenactment, and commercial relations with a Middle Eastern sheikdom, is entertainingly worked out with a key clue that could be described as a dazzler or a groaner—I can't decide which.

Among the reprints are a new edition of E.C. Bentley's 1913 classic *Trent's Last Case* (Carroll & Graf, $3.95), with an introduction by Dorothy L. Sayers, and Tony Fennelly's *Murder with a Twist* (Carroll & Graf, $4.95), combining the author's two New Orleans-based Matt Sinclair novels, *The Glory Hole Murders* (1985) and *The Closet Hanging* (1987), which I found funny and entertaining but some readers offended by explicit sex and violence may want to avoid. An off-trail item in trade paperback is Glen Baxter's 1990 illustrated mystery *The Billiard Table Murders* (Avon, $10), a wild and wide-ranging parody with multiple murders (not all by billiard table) that may appeal to fantasy and science fiction readers as much as mystery fans.

A new publishing company, masterminded by well-known mystery book dealers Steve Stilwell and Bruce Taylor and high-powered fan William F. Deeck, debuts with a bang with a new edition (and the first to be published in the United States) of an outstanding mystery reference source, Robert Adey's *Locked Room Murders* (Crossover Press, 2333 Minneapolis Avenue, Minneapolis, MN 55406; $45). Adey lists over 2,000 novels and short stories involving locked rooms and other impossible crime situations, including 90 by the master of the form, John Dickson Carr, and over 80 by *EQMM*'s Edward D. Hoch. An appendix gives the solutions, separated from the problems to avoid giving away more than you want to know, along with occasional critical comments.

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Gordianus the Finder, the hero of Steven Saylor's novel Roman Blood *is one of the most original new creations in mystery fiction. A citizen of ancient Rome, Gordianus makes his second appearance in print in this case based on a true crime recounted in Cicero's oration "In Defense of Cluentius." In Saylor's colorful retelling of the story, Cicero advises his friend Lucius Claudius to seek the help of Gordianus in explaining the mysterious resurrection of a man whose deathbed will he witnessed—a man whose heirs insist he* **has** *left this world . . .*

A WILL IS A WAY

by STEVEN SAYLOR

Lucius Claudius was a sausage-fingered, plum-cheeked, cherry-nosed nobleman with a fuzzy wreath of thinning red hair on his florid pate and a tiny, pouting mouth.

The name Claudius marked him not only as a nobleman, but a patrician, hailing from that small group of old families who first made Rome great (or who at least fooled the rest of the Romans into thinking so). Not all patricians are rich; even the best families can go to seed over the centuries. But from the gold seal ring that Lucius wore, and from the other rings that kept it company—one of silver set with lapis, another of white gold with a bauble of flawless green glass—I suspected he was quite rich indeed. The rings were complemented by a gold necklace, from which more glittering glass baubles dangled amid the frazzled red hair that sprouted from his fleshy red chest. His toga was of the finest wool, and his shoes were of exquisitely tooled leather.

He was the very image of a wealthy patrician, not handsome and not very bright-looking either, but impeccably groomed and dressed. His green eyes twinkled and his pouting lips pursed easily into a smile, betraying a man with a naturally pleasant personality. Wealthy, well-born, and with a cheerful disposition, he struck me as a man who shouldn't have a worry in the world—except that he

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obviously did, or else he would never have come to see me.

We sat in the little garden of my house on the Esquiline Hill. Once upon a time a man of Lucius's social standing would never have been seen entering the house of Gordianus the Finder, but in recent years I seem to have acquired a certain respectability. I think the change began after my first case for the young advocate Cicero. Apparently Cicero has been saying nice things about me behind my back to his colleagues in the law courts, telling them that he actually put me up in his house once and it turned out that Gordianus, consorter with assassins and professional ferret notwithstanding, knew how to use a bowl and spoon and an indoor privy after all, and could even tell the difference between them. Lucius Claudius filled the chair I had pulled up for him almost to overflowing. He shifted a bit nervously and toyed with his rings, then smiled sheepishly and held up his cup. "A bit more?" he said, making an ingratiatingly silly face.

"Of course." I clapped my hands. "Bethesda! More wine for my guest. The best, from the green clay bottle."

Bethesda rather sullenly obeyed, taking her time to rise from where she had been sitting cross-legged beside a pillar. She disappeared into the house. Her movements were as graceful as the unfolding of a flower. Lucius watched her with a lump in his throat. He swallowed hard.

"A very beautiful slave," he whispered.

"Thank you, Lucius Claudius." I hoped he wouldn't offer to buy her, as so many of my wealthier clients do. I hoped in vain.

"I don't suppose you'd consider—" he began.

"Alas, no, Lucius Claudius."

"But I was going to say—"

"I would sooner sell my thirteenth rib."

"Ah." He nodded sagely, then wrinkled his fleshy brow. "*What* did you say?"

"Oh, an expression I picked up from Bethesda. According to her ancestors on her father's side, the first woman was fashioned from a rib bone taken from the first man, by a god called Jehovah. That is why all men are lacking a thirteenth rib."

"Are they?" Lucius poked at his rib cage, but I think he was much too well-padded to actually feel a rib.

I took a sip of wine and smiled. Bethesda has told me the Hebrew tale of the first man and woman many times. Each time she tells it I clutch my side and pretend to bleat from pain, until she starts to

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pout and we both end up laughing. It seems to me a most peculiar tale, but no stranger than the stories her Egyptian mother told her about jackal-headed gods and crocodiles who walk upright. If it is true, this Hebrew god is worthy of respect. Not even Jupiter could claim to have created anything half as exquisite as Bethesda.

I had spent enough time putting my guest at ease. "Tell me, Lucius Claudius, what is it that troubles you?"

"You will think me very foolish . . ." he began.

"No, I will not," I assured him, thinking I probably would.

"Well, it was only the day before yesterday—or was it the day before that? It was the day after the Ides of May, of that I'm sure, whichever day that was—"

"I believe that was the day before yesterday," I said. Bethesda reappeared and stood in the shadows of the portico, awaiting a nod from me. I shook my head, telling her to wait. Another cup of wine might serve to loosen Lucius's tongue, but he was befuddled enough already. "And what transpired on the day before yesterday?"

"I happened to be in this very neighborhood—well, not up here on the Esquiline Hill, but down in the valley, in the Subura—"

"The Subura is a fascinating neighborhood," I said, trying to imagine what attraction its tawdry streets might hold for a man who probably lived in a mansion on the Palatine Hill. Gaming houses, brothels, taverns, and criminals for hire—these came to mind.

He sighed. "You see, my days are very idle. I've never had a head for politics or finance, like others in my family; I feel useless in the Forum. I've tried living in the country, but I'm not much of a farmer; cows bore me. I don't like entertaining, either—strangers coming to dinner, all of them twice as clever as I am, and me obliged to think up some way to amuse them—such a bother. I get bored rather easily, you see. So very, very bored."

"Yes?" I prompted, suppressing a yawn.

"So I go wandering about the city. Over to Tarentum to see the old people easing their joints in the hot springs. To the Field of Mars to see the chariot racers train their horses. All up and down the Tiber, to the fish markets and the cattle markets and the markets with foreign goods. I like seeing other people at work; I relish the way they go about their business with such determination. I like watching women haggle with vendors, or seeing a builder argue with his masons, or noticing how the women who hang from brothel windows slam their shutters when a troupe of rowdy gladiators come brawling down the street. All these people seem so alive, so full of

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purpose, so—so very opposite of *bored*. Do you understand, Gordianus?"

"I think I do, Lucius Claudius."

"Then you'll understand why I love the Subura. What a neighborhood! One can almost smell the passion! The crowded tenements, the strange odors, the spectacle of humanity! The winding, narrow little streets, the dark, dank alleys, the sounds that drift down from the upper-story windows of strangers arguing, laughing, making love—what a mysterious and vital place the Subura is!"

"There's nothing so very mysterious about squalor," I suggested.

"Ah, but there is," insisted Lucius; and to him, I suppose, there was.

"Tell me about your adventure two days ago, on the day after the Ides."

"Certainly. But I thought you sent the girl for more wine?"

I clapped my hands. Bethesda stepped from the shadows. The sunlight glinted on her long, blue-black tresses. As she filled Lucius's cup he seemed unable to look up at her. He swallowed, smiled shyly, and nodded vigorously at the quality of my best wine, which was probably not good enough to give to his slaves.

He continued.

"That morning, quite early, I happened to be strolling down one of the side streets off the main Subura Way, whistling a tune, noticing how spring had brought out all sorts of tiny flowers and shoots between the paving stones. Beauty asserts itself even here amid such squalor, I thought to myself, and I considered composing a poem, except that I'm not very good at poems—"

"And then something *happened?*" I prompted.

"Oh, yes. A man shouted down to me from a second-story window. He said, 'Please, Citizen, come quick! A man is dying!' I hesitated. After all, he might have been trying to lure me into the building to rob me, or worse, and I didn't even have a slave with me for protection—I like going out alone, you see. Then another man appeared at the window beside the first, and said, 'Please, Citizen, we need your help. The young man is dying and he's made out a will—he needs seven citizens to witness it and we already have six. Won't you come up?'

"Well, I did go up. It's not very often that anybody needs me for anything. How could I refuse? The apartment turned out to be a rather nicely furnished set of rooms, not at all shabby and certainly not menacing. In one of the rooms a man lay wrapped in a blanket

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upon a couch, moaning and shivering. An older man was attending to him, daubing his brow with a damp cloth. There were six others crowded into the room. No one seemed to know anyone else—it seemed we each had been summoned off the street, one by one."

"To witness the will of the dying man?"

"Yes. His name was Asuvius, from the town of Larinum. He was visiting the city when he was struck by a terrible malady. He lay on the bed, wet with sweat and trembling with fever. The illness had aged him terribly—according to his friend he wasn't yet twenty, yet his face was haggard and lined. Doctors had been summoned but had been of no use. Young Asuvius feared that he would die at any moment. Never having made a will—such a young man, after all—he had sent his friend to procure a wax tablet and a stylus. I didn't read the document as it was passed among us, of course, but I saw that it had been written by two different hands. He must have written the first few lines himself, in a faltering, unsteady hand; I suppose his friend finished the document for him. Seven witnesses were required, so to expedite matters the older man had simply called for citizens to come up from the street. While we watched, the poor lad scrawled his name with the stylus and pressed his seal ring into the wax."

"After which you signed and sealed it yourself?"

"Yes, along with the others. Then the older man thanked us and urged us to leave the room so that young Asuvius could rest quietly before the end came. I don't mind telling you that I was weeping like a fountain as I stepped onto the street, and I wasn't the only one. I strolled about the Subura in a melancholy mood, thinking about that young man's fate, about his poor family back in Larinum and how they would take the news. I remember walking by a brothel situated at the end of the block, hardly a hundred paces from the dying man's room, and being struck by the contrast, the irony, that within those walls there lurked such pleasure and relief, while only a few doors down, the mouth of Pluto was opening to swallow a dying country lad. I remember thinking what a lovely poem such an irony might inspire—"

"No doubt it would, in the hands of a truly great poet," I acknowledged quickly. "So, did you ever learn what became of the youth?"

"A few hours later, after strolling about the city in a sad haze, I found myself back on that very street, as if the invisible hand of a god had guided me there. It was shortly after noon. The landlord told me that young Asuvius had died not long after I left. The older

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man—Oppianicus his name was, also of Larinum—had summoned the landlord to the room, weeping and lamenting, and had shown the landlord the body all wrapped up in a sheet. Later the landlord saw Oppianicus and another man from Larinum carry the body down the stairs and load it into a cart to take it to the embalmers outside the Esquiline Gate." Lucius sighed. "I tossed and turned all night, thinking about the fickleness of the Fates and the way that Fortune can turn her back even on a young man starting out in life. It made me think of all the days I've wasted, all the hours of boredom . . ."

Before he could contemplate the birth of another poem, I nodded to Bethesda to refill his cup and my own. "A sad tale, Lucius Claudius, but not uncommon. Life in the city is full of tragedies. Strangers die around us every day. We persevere."

"But that's just the point—young Asuvius *isn't* dead! I saw him just this morning, strolling down the Subura Way, smiling and happy! Oh, he still appeared a bit haggard, but he was certainly up and walking."

"Perhaps you were mistaken."

"Impossible. He was with the older man, Oppianicus. I called to them across the street. Oppianicus saw me—or at least I thought he did—but he took the younger man's arm and they disappeared into a shop on the corner. I followed after them, but a cart was passing in the street and the stupid driver almost ran me down. When I finally stepped into the shop they were gone. They must have passed through the shop into the cross street beyond."

He sat back and sipped his wine. "I sat down in a shady spot by the public fountain and tried to think it through, then I remembered your name. I think it was Cicero who mentioned you to me, that young advocate who did a bit of legal work for me last year. I can't imagine who else might help me. What do you say, Gordianus? Am I mad? Or is it true that the shades of the dead walk abroad in the noonday sun?"

"The answer to both questions may be yes, Lucius Claudius, but that doesn't explain what's occurred. From what you've told me, I should think that something quite devious and all too human is afoot. But tell me, what is your concern? You don't know either of these men. What is your interest in this mystery?"

"Don't you understand, Gordianus, after all I've told you? I spend my days in idle boredom, peeking into the windows of other people's lives. Now something has happened that actually titillates me. I

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would investigate the circumstances by myself, only—" the great bulk of his body shrank a bit "—I'm not exactly brave."

I glanced at the glittering jewelry about his fingers and throat. "I should tell you, then, that I'm not exactly cheap."

"And I am not exactly poor."

Lucius insisted on accompanying me, though I warned him that if he feared boredom, my initial inquiries were likely to prove more excruciating than he could bear. Searching through the Subura for a pair of strangers from out of town was hardly my idea of excitement, but Lucius wanted to follow my every step. I could only shrug and allow it; if he wanted to follow me like a dog, he was certainly paying well enough for the privilege.

I began at the house where the young man had supposedly died and where Lucius had witnessed the signing of his will. The landlord had nothing more to say than what he had already said to Lucius—until I nudged my client and indicated that he should rattle his coin purse. The musical jingling induced the landlord to sing.

The older man, Oppianicus, had been renting the room for more than a month. He and his younger friends from Larinum were much given to debauchery—the landlord could deduce that much from the sour smell of spilled wine that wafted from their room, from the raucous gambling parties they held, and from the steady parade of prostitutes who visited them from the brothel down the street.

"And the younger man, Asuvius, the one who died?" I asked.

"Yes, what of him?"

"He was equally debauched?"

The landlord shrugged. "You know how it is, these young men from small towns, especially the lads who have a bit of money, they come to Rome and they want to live a little."

"Sad, that this one should die, instead."

"That has nothing to do with me," the landlord protested. "I keep a safe house. It wasn't as if the boy was murdered in one of my rooms. He took sick and died."

"Did he look particularly frail?"

"Not at all, but debauchery can ruin any man's health."

"Not in a month's time."

"When illness strikes, it strikes; neither man nor god can lengthen a man's time once the Fates have measured out the thread of his life."

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"Wise words," I agreed. I pulled a few copper coins from Lucius's purse and slapped them into the man's waiting palm.

The brothel down the street was one of the Subura's more respectable, which is to say more expensive, houses of entertainment. Several well-dressed slaves lingered outside the door, waiting for their masters to come out. Inside, the floor of the little foyer was decorated with a black and white mosaic of Priapus pursuing a wood nymph. Rich tapestries of red and green covered the walls.

The clientele was not shoddy, either. While we waited for the master of the house, a customer passed us on his way to the door. He was at least a minor magistrate, to judge from his gold seal ring, and he seemed to know Lucius, at whom he cast a puzzled gaze.

"You—Lucius Claudius—here in Priapus's Palace?"

"Yes, and what of it, Gaius Fabius?"

"But I'd never have dreamed you had a lustful bone in your body!"

Lucius sniffed at the ceiling. "I happen to be here on important business, if you don't mind."

"Oh, I see. But of course. Don't let me interrupt you!" The man suppressed a laugh until he was out the door. I heard him braying in the street.

"Harrumph! Let him laugh and gossip about me behind my back," said Lucius. "I shall compose a satirical poem for my revenge, so witheringly spiteful that it shall render that buffoon too limp to visit this—what did he call this place?"

"Priapus's Palace," piped an unctuously friendly voice. Our host suddenly appeared between us and slid his arms around our shoulders. "And what pleasures may I offer to amuse two such fine specimens of Roman manhood?" The man smiled blandly at me, then at Lucius, then at the baubles that decorated Lucius's neck and fingers. He licked his lips and slithered to the center of the room, turned, and clapped his hands. A file of scantily-clad women began to enter the room.

"Actually," I said hurriedly, "we've come on behalf of a friend."

"Oh?"

"A regular client of your establishment in recent days, I believe. A young visitor to Rome, named Asuvius."

From the corner of my eye I saw a sudden movement among the girls. One of them, a honey blonde, tripped and thrust out her hands for balance. She turned a pair of startled blue eyes in my direction.

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"Oh yes, that handsome lad from Larinum," gushed our host. "We haven't seen him for at least a day and a half—I was beginning to wonder what had become of him!"

"We're here on his behalf," I said, thinking it might not be a lie, when all was said and done. "He sent us to fetch his favorite girl—but I can't seem to remember her name. Can you remember it, Lucius?"

Lucius gave a start and blinked his eyes, which were trained on the girls and threatened to pop from their sockets. "Me? Oh no, I can't remember a thing."

A look of pure avarice crossed our host's face. "His favorite? Ah, let me think . . . yes, that would be Merula, most definitely Merula!" Another clap of his hands fetched a slave who put an ear to his master's whispering lips, then ran from the room. A moment later Merula appeared, a stunning Ethiopian so tall that she had to bow her head to pass through the doorway. Her skin was the color of midnight and her eyes flashed like shooting stars.

Lucius was visibly impressed and reached for his purse, but I stayed his hand. It occurred to me that our host was offering us his most expensive property, not the one which had necessarily been the favorite of young Asuvius.

"No, no," I said, "I'm sure I would have remembered a name like Merula."

"Ah, and she sings like a blackbird, as well," interjected our host.

"Nevertheless, I think we were meant to fetch *that* one." I nodded at the honey blonde, who gazed back at me with apprehensive blue eyes.

The tavern across the street was pleasantly cool and dark, and almost deserted. Columba sat within the cloak Lucius had thrown over her transparent gown, looking pensive.

"The day before yesterday?" She frowned.

"Yes, the day after the Ides of May," offered Lucius, certain at last that he had his chronology straight, and eager to help.

"And you say that you saw Asuvius in his room, deathly ill?" She continued to frown.

"So it appeared when this man Oppianicus called me up to the room." Lucius leaned on one elbow, gazing at her raptly and ignoring his cup of wine. He was not used to being so near such a beautiful girl, I could tell.

"And this was in the morning?" Columba asked.

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"Yes, quite early in the morning."

"But Asuvius was with me!"

"Can you be sure of that?"

"Certainly, because he had slept the whole night with me, in my room at the Palace, and we didn't wake until quite late that morning. Even then, we didn't leave the room . . ."

"Ah, youth!" I sighed.

She blushed faintly. "And we stayed in our room to eat our midday meal. So you see, you must have the days mixed up, or else—"

"Yes?"

"Well, it's the oddest thing. Some of Asuvius's freedmen were by the Palace only yesterday, asking for him. They seemed not to know where he was. They seemed rather worried." She looked at me, suddenly suspicious. "What is your interest in Asuvius?"

"I'm not really sure," I said truthfully. "Does it matter?" I slid a copper coin from Lucius's purse and pushed it across the table to her. She looked at it coolly, then slipped her tiny white hand over it.

"I should hate it if anything has really happened to Asuvius," she said quietly. "He really is a sweet boy. Do you know, he said it was his very first time, when he came to the Palace a month ago? I could believe it, too . . . " She broke off with a wistful sigh, laughed sadly, then sighed again. "I shall hate it if it's true that he's taken sick and died so suddenly."

"Oh, but he hasn't," said Lucius. "That's why we're here; that's what we don't understand. I saw him alive and well with my own eyes, this very morning!"

"But then, how can you say he was deathly ill two days ago, and that the landlord saw his body taken away in a car?" Columba frowned. "I tell you, he was with me the whole morning. Asuvius was never sick at all; you must be confused."

"Then you last saw him on the day before yesterday, the same day that Lucius Claudius was called up to witness the lad's will," I said. "Tell me, Columba, and this might be very important: was he wearing his seal ring? All citizens possess one."

"He was wearing very little at all," she said frankly.

"Columba, that is not an answer."

"Well, of course, he wears his ring always. I'm sure he was wearing it that morning."

"You seem awfully certain. Surely he wasn't signing documents there in your room?"

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She looked at me coolly, then spoke very slowly. "Sometimes, when a man and woman are being intimate, there is cause to notice that one of them happens to be wearing a ring . . . perhaps one feels a certain discomfort . . . Yes, I'm sure he was wearing his ring."

I nodded, satisfied. "When did he leave you?"

"After we ate our midday meal. His friends from Larinum came to collect him."

"Not his freedmen?"

"No, Asuvius doesn't have much use for servants, he says they only get in his way. He's always sending them off on silly errands to keep them away from him. He says they'll carry gossip back to his sisters in Larinum."

"And to his parents, as well, I suppose?"

"Alas, Asuvius has no parents. His mother and father died in a fire only a year ago. It was a hard year that followed, having to take on his father's duties in such a hurry, and after such a terrible tragedy. All the big farms he owns, and all the slaves! All the paperwork, counting up figures so he'll know what he's worth. To hear him talk, you'd think a rich man has more work to do than a poor one!"

"So it may seem, to a young lad who'd rather be carefree and reckless," I noted.

"This trip to Rome was to be his holiday, after so much grieving and labor. It was his friends who suggested the trip."

"Ah, the same friends who came for him the day before yesterday."

"Yes, crusty old Oppianicus and his young friend, Vulpinus on account of his foxy disposition. Always nosing into things, never seems to be completely honest, even when there's no point in lying. Quite a charmer, really, and not bad looking."

"I know the sort," I said.

"He plays a sort of older brother to Asuvius, since Asuvius has no brothers—brought him to the city, arranged for a place to stay, showed him how to have a good time."

"I see. And two days ago, as they were leaving Priapus's Palace, did Oppianicus and the Fox give any hint as to where they were taking young Asuvius?"

"More than a hint. They said they were off to the Gardens."

"What Gardens?"

"Why, the ones outside the Esquiline Gate. Oppianicus and Vulpinus had been telling Asuvius how splendid they are, with splashing fountains and flowers in full bloom—May is a perfect month to visit

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them. Asuvius was very eager to go. There are so many sights here in the city that he hasn't yet seen, having spent so much of his time, well, enjoying indoor pleasures." Columba smiled a bit crookedly. "He's hardly stepped outside the Subura. I don't think he's even been down to see the Forum!"

"Ah yes, and of course a young visitor from Larinum would hardly want to miss seeing the famous Gardens outside the Esquiline Gate."

"I suppose not, from the way Oppianicus and Vulpinus described them—leafy green tunnels and beautiful pools, meadows of blossoms and lovely statues. I wish I could see them myself, but the master hardly ever lets me out of the house except for business. Would you believe that I've been in Rome for almost two years and I'd never even heard of the Gardens?"

"I can believe that," I said gravely.

"But Asuvius said if the place turned out to be as special as his friends claimed, he might take me there himself in a few days, as a treat." She brightened a bit. I sighed.

We escorted her back to the Palace of Priapus. Her owner was surprised to see her back so soon, but he made no complaint about the fee.

Outside, the street darkened for a moment as a cloud obscured the sun. "No matter whose account is accurate, young Asuvius most assuredly did not die in his bed the day before yesterday," I said. "Either he was with Columba, very much alive and well, or, if indeed you saw him lying feverish in his apartment, he recovered and you saw him on the street this morning. Still, I begin to fear for the lad. I fear for him most desperately."

"Why?" asked Lucius.

"You know as well as I, Lucius Claudius, that there are no gardens outside the Esquiline Gate!"

One passes through the Esquiline Gate from the city of the living into the city of the dead. On the left hand is the public necropolis of Rome, where the modest tombs of the Roman masses are crowded together like spectators in a mob. Long ago, when Rome was young, the lime pits were discovered nearby. Just as the city of the living sprang up around the river and the Forum and the markets, so the city of the dead sprang up around the lime pits and the crematoria and the parlors where corpses are beautified. On the right hand are the public refuse pits, where the residents of the Subura and

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surrounding neighborhoods dump their trash. All manner of waste lies heaped in the sandpits—broken bits of crockery and furniture, rotting scraps of food, discarded garments soiled and torn beyond even a beggar's use. Here and there the custodians light small fires to consume the debris, then rake fresh sand over the smoldering embers.

No matter in which direction one looks, there are certainly no gardens outside the Esquiline Gate, unless one counts the isolated flowers that spring up among the moldering debris of the trash heaps, or the scraggly vines which wind their way about the old, neglected tombs of the forgotten dead. I began to suspect that Oppianicus and the Fox had a cruel sense of humor indeed.

A glance at Lucius told me that he was having second thoughts about accompanying me on this part of my investigation. The Subura and its vices might seem colorful or quaint, but even Lucius could find no charm in the necropolis and the rubbish tips. He wrinkled his nose and batted a swarm of flies from his face, but he did not turn back.

We passed back and forth between the right side of the road and the left, questioning the few people we met about three strangers they might have seen two days before—an older man, a foxy young rogue, and a mere lad. The tenders of the dead waved us aside, having no patience to deal with the living; the custodians of the trash heaps shrugged and shook their heads.

We stood at the edge of the sandpits, surveying a prospect that might have looked like Hades, if there were a sun to shine through the hazy smoke of Hades onto its smoldering wastes. Suddenly, there was a low hissing noise behind us. Lucius started. My hand jumped to my dagger.

The maker of the noise was a shuffling, stooped derelict who had been watching us from behind a heap of smoldering rubbish.

"What do you want?" I asked, keeping my hand close to the dagger.

The lump of filthy hair and rags swayed a bit, and two milky eyes stared up at me. "I hear you're looking for someone," the man finally said.

"Perhaps."

"Then perhaps I can help you."

"Speak plainly."

"I know where you'll find the young man!"

"What young man are you talking about?"

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The figure stooped and looked up at me sidelong. "I heard you asking one of the workers a moment ago. You didn't see me, but I saw you, and I listened. I heard you asking about the three men who were by here two days ago, the older man and the boy and the one between. I know where the boy is!"

"Show us."

The creature held out a hand so stained and weathered it looked like a stump of wood. Lucius drew back, appalled, but reached for his purse. I stayed his hand.

"After you show us," I said.

The thing hissed at me. It stamped its foot and growled. Finally it turned and waved for us to follow.

I grabbed Lucius's arm and whispered in his ear. "You mustn't come. Such a creature is likely to lure us into a trap. Look at the jewels you wear, the purse you carry. Go to the crematoria, where you'll be safe. I'll follow the man alone."

Lucius looked at me, his lips pursed, his eyes open wide. "Gordianus, you must be joking. No power of man or god will stop me from seeing whatever this man has to show us!"

The creature shambled and lurched over the rubbish heaps and drifts of dirty sand. We strode deeper and deeper into the wastes. The heaps of ash rose higher around us, hiding us from the road. The creature led us around the flank of a low sandy hill. An orange haze engulfed us. An acrid cloud of smoke swirled around us. I choked. Lucius reached for his throat and began to cough. The hot breath of an open flame blew against my face.

Through the murk I saw the derelict silhouetted against the fire. He bobbed his head up and down and pointed at something in the flames.

"What is it?" I wheezed. "I see nothing."

Lucius gave a start. He seized my arm and pointed. There, within the inferno, amid the indiscriminate heap of fiery rubbish, I glimpsed the remains of a human body.

The flaming heap collapsed upon itself, sending out a spray of orange cinders. I covered my face with my sleeve and put my arm around Lucius's shoulder. Together we fled from the blazing heat and smoke. The decrepit creature scampered after us, his long brown arm extended, palm-up.

"There is no proof that the body the derelict showed us was that of Asuvius. It might have been another of his kind, for all we know.

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The truth is beyond proving. That is the crux of the matter."

I took a long sip of wine. Night had descended on Rome. Crickets chirred in my garden. Bethesda sat beneath the portico nearby, beside a softly glowing lamp. She pretended to stitch a torn tunic, but listened to every word. Lucius Claudius sat beside me, staring at the moon's reflection in his cup.

"Tell me, Gordianus, how exactly do you explain the discrepancies between what I saw and the tale that Columba told us? What really happened the day after the Ides of May?"

"I should think that the sequence of events is clear."

"Even so—"

"Very well, this is how I would tell the story. There was once a wealthy young orphan in a town called Larinum who chose his friends very poorly. Two of those friends, an old rogue and a young predator with a long snout and pointed ears, talked him into going to Rome for a long holiday. The three of them took up residence in one of the seedier parts of town and proceeded to indulge in just the sorts of vices that are likely to lull a green country lad into a vulnerable stupor. Away from the boy's watchful sisters and the town gossips in Larinum, the Fox and old Oppianicus were free to hatch their scheme.

"On a morning when Asuvius was dallying with his favorite prostitute, the Fox pretended to be the boy and took to his bed, feigning a mortal illness. Oppianicus summoned strangers off the street to act as witnesses to a will—people who wouldn't know Asuvius from Alexander. Oppianicus made at least one mistake, but he got away with it."

"What was that?"

"Someone must have asked the dying man's age. Oppianicus, without thinking, said he was not yet twenty; you told me so. True enough, if he meant Asuvius, and I gather that the Fox is well beyond twenty. Even so, you yourself ascribed the discrepancy to illness—'haggard and lined,' you said he looked, as if terribly aged from his sickness. The other witnesses probably thought the same thing. People will go to great lengths to make the evidence of their own eyes conform to whatever someone tells them is the truth."

Lucius frowned. "Why was the will in two different handwritings?"

"Yes, I remember you mentioning that. The Fox began it, feigning such a weak hand that he couldn't finish it; such a ploy would help to explain why his signature would not be recognizable as the hand

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of Asuvius—anyone would think it was the scrawl of a man nearly dead."

"But the Fox pressed his own seal ring into the wax," protested Lucius. "I saw him do it. It couldn't have been the true seal of Asuvius, who was with Columba, wearing his ring."

"I'll come to that. Now, once the will was witnessed all around, you and the others were shunted from the room. Oppianicus wound the Fox up in a sheet, tore his hair and worked tears into his eyes, then called for the landlord."

"Who saw a corpse!"

"Who *thought* he saw a corpse. All he saw was a body in a sheet. He thought Asuvius had died of a sudden illness; he took no pains to examine the corpse."

"But later he saw the two men taking the body away in a cart."

"He saw Oppianicus and the Fox, who had changed back into his clothes, carrying out something wrapped up in a sheet—a sack of corn meal, for all we know."

"Ah, and once they were out of sight they got rid of the cart and the corn meal and went to fetch Asuvius from the brothel."

"Yes, for their appointed stroll through the 'Gardens.' The derelict told us the rest, how they ushered the confused boy to a secluded spot where the Fox strangled him to death, how they stripped his body and hid his corpse amid the rubbish. That was when they stole the seal ring from his finger. Later they must have rubbed the Fox's seal from the wax and applied the true seal of Asuvius to the will."

"There's a law against that," said Lucius, without much conviction.

"Yes, the Cornelian law, enacted by our esteemed Senate just three years ago. Why do you think they passed such a law? Because falsifying wills has become as commonplace as senators picking their noses in public!"

Lucius nodded. "And so the scheme is complete; the false will cheats Asuvius's sisters and other relatives, no doubt, and leaves a tidy fortune to his dear friends Oppianicus and Marcus Avillius—also known as the Fox, for good reason."

I nodded.

"We must do something!"

"Yes, but what? I suppose you could bring a suit against the culprits and attempt to prove that the will is fraudulent. That should take up a great deal of your time and money; if you think you suffer from boredom now, wait until after you've spent a month or two

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bustling from clerk to clerk filing actions down in the Forum. And if Oppianicus and the Fox find a lawyer half as crafty as they are, you'll likely as not be laughed out of court."

"Forget the fraudulent will. These men are guilty of cold-blooded murder!"

"But will you be able to prove it, without a corpse and with no reliable witness? Even if you could find him, our derelict friend is not the sort of man whose testimony would impress a Roman jury."

"You're telling me that we've come to the end of it?"

"I'm telling you that if you wish to proceed any further, what you need is an advocate, not Gordianus the Finder."

Ten days later, Lucius Claudius came knocking at my door again.

I was more than a little surprised to see him. Having set me on the trail of young Asuvius and having followed me to its end, I expected him to quickly lose interest and lapse into his customary boredom. Instead he informed me that he had been doing a bit of legwork on his own.

He invited me for a stroll. While we walked he talked of nothing in particular, but I noticed that we were drawing near to the street where the whole story had begun. Lucius remarked that he was thirsty. We stepped into the tavern across from Priapus's Palace.

"I have been thinking a great deal about what you said, Gordianus, about Roman justice. You're right; we can't trust the courts anymore. Advocates twist words and laws to their own purposes, pervert the sentiments of jurors, resort to intimidation and outright bribery. Still, true justice must be worth pursuing. I keep thinking of the flames . . . the sight of that young man's body, thrown into a rubbish pit and burned to ashes. By the way, Oppianicus and the Fox are back in town."

"Oh? Did they ever leave?"

"They were on their way back to Larinum when I saw them that day, before I came to you. Oppianicus made a great production of showing Asuvius's will to anyone who cared to look and filing it with the clerks in the Forum at Larinum. So my messengers to Larinum tell me."

"Messengers?"

"Yes, I thought I would get in touch with Asuvius's sisters. A band of his freedmen arrived in Rome just this morning."

"I see. And Oppianicus and the Fox are here already."

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"Yes. Oppianicus is staying with friends in a house over on the Aventine Hill. But the Fox is just across the street, in the apartment where they played their little charade."

I turned and looked out the window. From where we sat, I could see the ground-floor door of the tenement and the window above, the same window from which Lucius had been summoned to witness the will. The shutters were drawn.

"What a neighborhood," said Lucius. "Some days I think that almost anything could happen in the Subura." He craned his neck and looked over my shoulder. From up the street I heard the noise of an approaching mob.

There were twenty of them or more, brandishing knives and clubs. They gathered outside the tenement, where they banged their clubs against the door and demanded entrance. When the door did not open, they broke it down and streamed inside.

The shutters were thrown back and a face appeared at the window above. If the Fox was handsome and charming, as Columba had told us, it was impossible to tell at that moment. His eyes were bulging in panic and all the blood had drained from his cheeks. He stared down at the street and swallowed hard, as if working up his courage to jump. He hesitated a moment too long; hands gripped his shoulders and yanked him back into the room.

A moment later he was thrust stumbling from the doorway. The mob surrounded him and hounded him up the street. Street vendors and idlers scattered and disappeared into doorways. Windows flew open and curious faces peered down.

"Hurry," said Lucius, throwing back the last of his wine, "or we'll miss the fun. The Fox has been run out of his hole, and the hounds shall pursue him all the way to the Forum."

We hurried into the street. As we passed Priapus's Palace I looked up. Columba stood at a window, gazing down in confusion and excitement. Lucius waved to her, flashing an enormous grin. She gave a start and smiled back at him.

He cupped his hands and shouted, "Come with us!" When she bit her lip in hesitation, he waved with both hands.

Columba vanished from the window and a moment later was running up the street to join us. Her master appeared at the door, gesticulating and stamping his foot. Lucius turned and shook his purse at the man.

Asuvius's freedmen roared all the way to the Forum. The outer circle banged their clubs against walls and passing wagons; the

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inner circle kept the Fox hemmed in with a ring of daggers. They took up a chant: "Jus-tice! Jus-tice! Jus-tice!" By the time we reached the Forum, the Fox was looking hounded indeed.

The gang of freedmen put away their weapons and used their open hands to shove the Fox around and around in a dizzying circle. At last we came to the tribunal of the commissioners, whose most neglected duty is keeping order in the streets, and who also, incidentally, conduct investigations preliminary to bringing charges for crimes of violence. Beneath the shade of a portico, the unsuspecting commissioner for the Subura, Quintus Manilius, sat squinting at a stack of parchments. He looked up in alarm when the Fox came staggering before him. The freedmen, excited to fever pitch by their parade through the streets, all began speaking at once, creating an indecipherable roar.

Manilius wrinkled his brow. He banged his fist against the table and raised his hand. All voices fell silent except for one.

Even then I thought that the Fox would get the best of his accusers. He had only to stand up to his rights as a citizen and to keep his mouth shut. But the wicked are often cowards, even the coldest heart may be haunted by crime, and human foxes as often as not step into traps of their own devising.

The Fox rushed up to the bench, weeping, "Yes! Yes, I murdered him, it's true! Oppianicus made me do it! I would never have come up with such a plot on my own. It was Oppianicus's idea from the start, to create the false will and then murder Asuvius! If you don't believe me, call Oppianicus before this bench and force him to tell you the truth!"

I turned and gazed at Lucius Claudius, who looked just the same as he had always looked—sausage-fingered, plum-cheeked, cherry-nosed—but who no longer appeared to me the least bit foolish or dim-witted. His eyes glinted oddly. He looked a bit frightening, in fact, and terribly sure of himself, which is to say that he looked like what he was, a Roman noble. On his face was a smile such as great poets must smile when they have finished a magnum opus.

The rest of the tale is both good and bad mixed together.

I wish that I could report that Oppianicus and the Fox received their just deserts, but alas, Roman justice prevailed—which is to say that the honorable commissioner Quintus Manilius proved not too honorable to take a bribe from Oppianicus; that at least is what the Forum gossips say. Manilius first announced he would bring a

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charge of murder against the Fox and Oppianicus, then suddenly dropped the case. Lucius Claudius was bitterly disappointed. I advised him to take heart; from my own experience, villains like Oppianicus and the Fox eventually come to a bad end, though many others may suffer before they reach it.

Perhaps not coincidentally, at about the same time that the murder charges were dropped, the fraudulent will went missing in Larinum. In consequence, the property of the late Asuvius was divided among his surviving blood relations. Oppianicus and the Fox did not profit from his death.

The owner of Priapus's Palace was furious with Columba for leaving the establishment without his permission, and threatened to chastise her by putting hot coals on her feet, whereupon Lucius Claudius offered to buy her on the spot. I have no doubt that she is well treated in her new household. Lucius may not be the endlessly virile young man that Asuvius was, but that has not kept him from acting like a young man in love.

These days, I see Lucius Claudius quite often in the Forum, in the company of reasonably honest advocates like Cicero and Hortensius. Rome can always use another honest man in the Forum. He tells me that he recently completed a book of love poems and is thinking of running for office. He holds occasional dinner parties and spends his quiet time in the country, overseeing his farms and vineyards.

As the Etruscans used to say, it is an ill will that doesn't bring someone good fortune. The unfortunate Asuvius may not have left a will, after all, but I think that Lucius Claudius was a beneficiary nonetheless.

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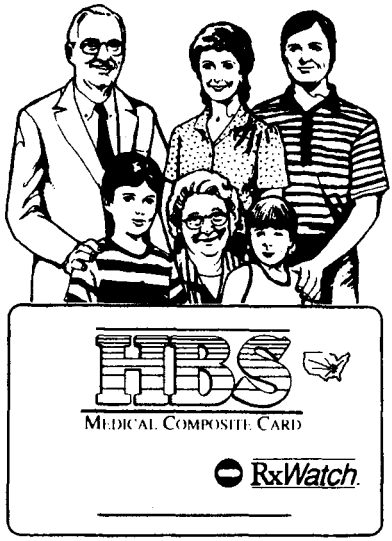

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Betty Rowlands spent a number of years writing English language courses for business before making her fiction debut. In 1988 she won the U. K.'s Sunday Express-Veuve Cliquot *Crime Short Story of the Year competition and subsequently had two mystery novels published by Hodder & Stoughton in the U. K. Her books have been published in the United States by Walker and Company and the Berkeley Publishing Group. Ms. Rowlands lives in Gloucestershire, England and most often sets her stories in the type of village familiar to readers of Golden Age detective fiction, although her characters are always thoroughly modern . . .*

THE KILLER INSTINCT

by BETTY ROWLANDS

Evelina had let her morning tea get cold. When Charlie came back into the bedroom after his shower, he stood for a moment looking down at her. In spite of everything, he could not help but admire the perfection of her features, even while he fought an all but overwhelming urge to pour the scummy liquid all over them. The thought of washing away the self-satisfied expression that she always wore, even in sleep, gave him an almost erotic pleasure.

He bent down and shook her by the shoulder. "Come on old girl, wakey-wakey!"

Evelina yawned, sat up, and looked at the clock. "Heavens, is that the time?" She reached for her cup, took a sip, and pulled a face.

"I'll make you a fresh one," he said.

"Don't bother. I must get a move on or I'll be late." She swung her feet to the floor and picked up her robe.

"You should get to bed earlier," said Charlie. Evelina, on her way to the bathroom, ignored the remark. He raised his voice a little. "I don't know why you sit up half the night watching crime movies—you always guess the killer in the first reel."

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"It helps to keep my wits sharpened—you should try it some time!" She popped her head round the bathroom door and smiled, so he supposed she meant it as a joke. With an effort, he smiled back.

Over breakfast, she announced, "I've got an early appointment at the hairdresser and then I'm going straight on to the bank to talk about finance for the new factory extension. Philip's meeting me there. I want you to spend the morning on small-debt collection. There must be at least a couple of grand that needs chasing up."

Charlie scowled. "I hate that job!" he grumbled. "I always get some adenoidal clerk giving me a lot of crap about a cheque being in the post or waiting for signature."

"Someone has to do it. And I've told you before, don't be put off with underlings, ask for the Chief Accountant."

"Why can't I come to the meeting at the bank? I'm a director of the company, aren't I?"

"Where's the point? You know you haven't got a clue about finance. That's why your father left control of the company to me." She pushed back her chair and picked up her briefcase. With her brisk manner and her sleek dark hair swinging above the collar of her designer suit, she was the epitome of the successful businesswoman. And what was he? A director of the company founded by his father with about as much say in its management as one of the factory workers. Not for the first time, Charlie's pent-up resentment exploded.

"If you think I'm so bloody useless, why the hell did you marry me?" he shouted.

Normally, after such an outburst, she would pat him on the cheek and tell him not to be such an old silly. This time, all he got was a casual, over-the-shoulder "I've often wondered!" as she went out of the room.

Resentment came to the boil with all the fury and impotence of milk rising in a pan. He leapt to his feet and rushed after her, almost speechless with anger. "You self-satisfied bloody cow, I'd like to kill you!" he spluttered.

"Kill me?" She turned to face him, her lip curled, her eyebrows raised in mockery. "You haven't got the nerve to wring the neck of a chicken!"

"Don't bank on it!" he yelled as the front door closed behind her.

It wasn't the first time they'd had this sort of exchange and, as usual, he relieved his frustration by imagining various methods of dispatching Evelina and disposing of her body. As he cleared the

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breakfast table, and later during the short drive to work, he fuelled his murderous feelings by reminding himself of the humiliations she was constantly inflicting on him: her habit of marching into his office without knocking; contradicting him in front of underlings; sending for him as if he were a junior clerk; putting him down during meetings with important clients.

He forced himself to tackle the day's correspondence, but his mind kept wandering while he was dictating. He fiddled with his paper knife and pictured himself plunging it into Evelina's marble-smooth flesh. He caught an anxious glance from his secretary and wondered wryly how she would react if she could read his thoughts.

When the letters were finished he wandered down the corridor to Evelina's office. On the wall was a photograph, placed so that no one entering the room could fail to notice it. It depicted some grinning captain of industry presenting her with a trophy as Young Career Woman of the Year. The trophy itself, a piece of abstract sculpture in heavy glass, was on the desk doing duty as a paperweight. Charlie picked it up and fingered it, toying with the idea of hurling it at the photograph, when Evelina's secretary walked in with an armful of files.

"Is there something you want, Mr. Drew?" she asked.

"Er, no thanks." He was conscious that she was looking at him strangely as he put the thing down. "I just wondered, I mean, I forgot for the moment that Mrs. Drew is out this morning."

"She'll be back after lunch—you might catch her about two-thirty but she has a meeting at three. Would you like me to give her a message?"

"No thanks." Hands in pockets, Charlie trailed back to his own office. Remembering Evelina's instructions, he ploughed through the list of telephone calls with varying degrees of success until a mixture of hunger and exasperation drove him out in search of lunch.

Over his sandwich and glass of beer, he brooded over the business of the new factory. As usual, he was being kept on the sidelines. Evelina had spent hours closeted with Philip Sanderson, the Financial Director, planning God knew what dubious scheme for raising money, only giving Charlie the sketchiest of details and asking him to sign things without allowing him time to study them.

They were up to something, those two. Perhaps they were having an affair. Charlie brightened at the thought. If that were the case, he could divorce Evelina and marry Vanessa. There was more mile-

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age in that possibility than there was in murder. In his heart, he knew that Evelina was right. What he lacked was the killer instinct.

Vanessa worked in the Personnel Department. Once a week, while Evelina went off to her art appreciation class and then on to a late supper with her arty-crafty friends, Charlie and Vanessa would have an intimate little dinner in their favourite restaurant before going back to her apartment to make love.

Vanessa was as different from Evelina as it was possible to be. Everything about her was warmly feminine: her voluptuous, welcoming body, her glowing amber eyes, her gentle voice and affectionate ways. Even in their most intimate moments, Charlie fondly told himself, she treated him with a certain deference, as befitted a mere clerical assistant having an affair with one of the directors. In Vanessa, he had the perfect antidote to Evelina's patronizing efficiency.

It was hard on her, of course, that he could give her so little of his time, but at least he could afford to take her to first-class restaurants, buy her favourite perfume and the odd piece of jewelry, or help her out if she was short of cash at the end of the month. The fact that he had only a minority shareholding and little or no say in the running of the company seemed to be a matter of total indifference to her. She was happy to be with him, just the way he was.

As they lay in bed during his next visit, he whispered in her ear, "Wouldn't it be lovely if we could do this more often?"

Vanessa giggled. "That sounds terribly corny."

Her mockery stung him. What was wrong with being corny? They were in love, weren't they?

"But it would, wouldn't it?" he persisted.

She shrugged, turned onto her side away from him, and reached for a chocolate. "If you say so," she murmured, yawning.

She was always drowsy after sex, and he knew that when he got up to leave she would roll onto her stomach, bury her face in the pillow, sprawl out her arms and legs like a starfish, and almost immediately fall asleep. He felt a vague sense of unease. So far theirs had been a joyous, undemanding affair, their delight in one another's bodies never-ending, their relaxed companionship undisturbed by anything more serious than planning the date of their next meeting. Now, for reasons he was unable to identify, he felt an urgent need for some deeper reassurance from her.

He propped himself on one elbow and shook her gently by the shoulder. "Wouldn't you be happier if I didn't have to go home?" he persisted.

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"You don't live far away." She sounded almost indifferent. Now he was really hurt. It was the first time he had hinted at the possibility of a permanent relationship and she'd hardly reacted. She could at least have asked if he was thinking of leaving Evelina. Instead, she squinted at her bedside clock and mumbled, "Oughtn't you to be going?"

"I suppose so." He got out of bed, picked up his clothes, and went to the bathroom. When he returned, fully dressed, she was face down as usual, one arm trailing across the covers and her long hair spread like a shining golden shawl over her shoulders. He caressed it as he bent to kiss her, thinking how much he loved her, how wonderful it was that she loved him. That should be enough for any man, he told himself, so why rock the boat with useless speculation about the future?

"Next Wednesday?" he said softly.

"Mmm."

The following day, Evelina told him she had an appointment in London but declined to give any details. Later, in the office, he decided to have a private talk with Philip. Without Evelina there to take charge of the discussion, he might be able to find out what was going on. Philip's secretary answered his call.

"Ask Mr. Sanderson if he could spare me a few minutes," he said.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Drew, he's not in today."

Charlie slammed down the receiver. Fate seemed to thwart him at every turn.

Evelina didn't appear or telephone all day. When Charlie reached home that evening the apartment was deserted and for a moment he thought they'd had burglars. Some of the pictures and all Evelina's books and records were missing from the living room. He rushed into the bedroom and saw her wardrobe standing open and empty, the dressing table clear. A note lay on the bed.

"Have been headhunted by a top New York fashion house," it read. "Philip's bought my shares in the company. He says you can keep yours and stay on if you want to, or he'll buy you out if you'd rather. You won't miss me—your little blonde bimbo will console you."

Charlie ripped up the note, almost choking with anger and mortification. Those two traitors had plotted and schemed behind his back, treated him as no better than an office boy. The sneering reference to Vanessa was like gasoline on a bonfire. If Evelina had been there at that moment, he would have choked her with his bare

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hands before seeking out Philip and sticking a knife in his guts. He poured himself a stiff whisky, tossed it back, and poured another, swearing revenge. He had the killer instinct now, by God he had!

After a while, he calmed down a little and began to think. Maybe it wasn't such a disaster after all. On the contrary, it could turn out for the best. Philip mightn't be such a bad sort to work for. And now that Evelina had walked out on him, he could divorce the bitch and marry Vanessa.

Sweet little Vanessa! Of course she hadn't responded to his hints about marriage—she knew the score, knew that so long as Evelina was around he'd never be free. Things were different now. He'd call her this minute and break the glorious news. Better still, he'd go round to her apartment and tell her in person. He'd take a bottle of champagne and they'd have a celebratory drink before having dinner at the best restaurant in town.

He took a shower and put on fresh clothes. His spirits soared to dizzy, delirious heights; the whisky and the excitement sent his pulse rate soaring. He let loose a burst of exuberant song as he picked up his jacket, left the house, and leapt into his car, driving like a lunatic towards Vanessa's welcoming arms.

A large, gleaming motorcycle was parked outside the house where she lived. He'd never noticed it before and supposed it must belong to one of the other tenants—although, as he remembered, all the other tenants were elderly. Perhaps a visiting son or grandson had left it there. It wasn't important. He bounded two at a time up the stairs to Vanessa's apartment.

Before he could press the bell, her door was opened by a flashily handsome young man who was evidently about to leave. He looked startled and made to push past but Charlie grabbed him by the arm.

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded, but in his heart he already knew. This smart ass with his gold earring, his leather gear and pungent body lotion was the owner of the motorcycle . . . and he was Vanessa's lover. She too had betrayed him.

The man wrenched his arm free and dashed down the stairs. In a futile gesture of outrage, Charlie hurled the bottle of champagne after him. It missed its target and hit the wall, fell with a thud on the half-landing, and began bumping towards the bottom, gathering momentum like a boulder rolling down a mountainside. The noise pounded in Charlie's ears as he ran back through the still-open door of Vanessa's apartment and burst into her bedroom.

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Oblivious to the disturbance, she lay, as she always did after lovemaking, stretched out face down beneath the lustrous curtain of hair, as if revelling in the gratification of her lust. The very air seemed to stink of her treachery. How many more had he been sharing her with? Rage, more destructive, more murderous than any that Evelina had aroused, swelled within him, exploded in his brain, and flowed in a revengeful tide along his arms. His hands closed round Vanessa's throat.

She offered no resistance. Maddened by fury, Charlie lifted her up and shook her, screaming obscenities. Her arms fell limply at her sides; his fingers became aware of a thin band of silk tightly knotted round her neck. Trembling—with terror now, not with anger—he turned her over, saw the protruding tongue, the dilated eyes, the congested, livid features. In a stunned silence, he let her body fall.

From behind him came a sound of banging doors and running feet. A woman's voice shrieked "Murder!" but he paid no heed. Whimpering like a child, he sank to his knees beside the bed and buried his face in his hands. He was still there when the police arrived.

DETECTIVERSE

A THIEVING UPDATE

by BLANCHE BOSHINSKI

A thief knew his life needed updating.
Revamping hot cars was frustrating.
His girl wouldn't caress
'Cause his clothes were a mess
From paint and so much lubricating.

So, he changed into a well-dressed commuter.
The altered man surely does suit her.
Now he anticipates nights
As he scans bits and bytes
And steals funds from a network computer.

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a *NEW* short story by

SCOTT MACKAY

To use the pool as a murder weapon had occurred to Earl only last night. He thought he would see a change, expecting the pool to glow, to hum, to in some way guarantee an imminent death for Larry, but nothing happened.

A story about the limits of make-believe and magic, evil wishes, and keen hopes . . .

POOL OF DISCONTENT

by SCOTT MACKAY

Earl Blatchford listened to Larry and Darlene shouting downstairs, his mouth sour from the can of Alpha-ghetti he had eaten for supper, his arms stiff as he clutched the threadbare bedspread. His eyes were fixed on the partially ripped poster of Hulk Hogan tacked next to the window. Norman Pike, Darlene's real son, lay in his crib, wheezing with each breath, his face pasty, his eyes bright. Earl got his runners from under the bed; he couldn't listen to the shouting any longer. Jimmy Dinsmore sat by the window looking out at the ruins of the old folks' home, his small mean eyes focused and hard. Earl put on his shoes and walked to the window.

A cold October rain dimpled the puddles in the yard outside, drummed against the rusted hulk of Larry's Chevrolet pickup truck, and glossed the rubble of the old folks' home. He had to get out of here before Larry started using his fists on Darlene.

He pulled on his jacket and then opened the window.

Jimmy's hand closed like a steel trap around Earl's wrist.

"Where are you going?" asked Jimmy. "You can't use the roof, not when it's raining."

"I'm going to the pool," said Earl. "Let go of my hand."

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"You're not going anywhere. Larry will kick the crap out of us."

Norman moaned, gazing through his crib bars at the two older boys. Earl tried to pull his hand away but Jimmy had a good grip, wasn't going to let go. Earl was in no mood to argue. He had to get away before the fists started. He shoved Jimmy hard, hooked his foot under the chair leg, and yanked. Jimmy's small eyes widened. He toppled backward, hitting his head on the radiator. Earl lifted the heavy window open and crawled out through the dormer onto the roof. His foot slipped and a loose shingle skittered down past the eaves to the muddy rain-soaked yard.

He crab-walked away from the dormer, butt to the roof, keeping his center of gravity low. Jimmy leaned out the window, his freckled face a mask of rage, his hands gripping the outside sill in white-knuckled fury.

"You're dead meat," he shouted. Jimmy began to climb out the window after Earl, but then lightning flashed somewhere behind the clouds, chalking the sky with anemic light, and thunder panned from horizon to horizon like a low growl of a dog. Jimmy cowered, looked up at the unsettled heavens with fearful eyes, and backed into the room. "You're dead meat, Earl," he shouted.

Earl kept crab-walking toward the television aerial, slipped again—there was no tread on these runners—got back up, and continued on, now fearing the roof, understanding why Larry never wanted them to use it in the rain.

At the eaves he stood up, careful of his balance, and gripped the aerial. He heard a shriek from downstairs—Larry was starting with his fists. He descended the aerial, stretching to reach the widely spaced rungs, his hands growing numb on the cold wet metal as the sky boiled above him like molten lead. Another burst of lightning blanched the clouds with sickly yellow light.

He jumped the final distance to the grass, hurried along the side of the house to the back yard, and darted behind Larry's pickup truck. He gazed at the kitchen window. She was in there right now, behind those pink curtains. But what could he do? He was only twelve years old. He couldn't stop someone like Larry. About the only thing he could do was run away until it was over.

He climbed the fence into the old folks' home and skirted the ruins through the mud, surveying the wreckage with glum fascination. A toilet stuck out of the mud like a white tombstone, a rusted linen cabinet lay on its side, its door missing, and a stack of old windows leaned against the steps of the wrecker's trailer. He crossed the pot-

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holed and cracked parking lot—no cars now, just large haul-away disposal bins—and climbed the path through the ragged sumac to the railway tracks.

Two main lines ran east and west, the rails sleek and polished, the bed gravel stained dark by grease and pitch. Decrepit factories stood on either side. Looking into the gloom, he saw the 5:55 approaching, its headlight pinning him through the mist. The 5:55 making its turn-around, he thought. The shunting rails shifted, the train creaked, made the crossover to the westbound tracks. The rumbling grew stronger. He stood two yards away as the diesel engine passed, counted cars to help him take his mind off Darlene. Hate to get his foot caught in those shunting rails just as the train was coming, he thought. Dead meat, as Jimmy would say. Maybe someday Larry would get his foot caught there.

Thirty-seven cars in all. Now it stood motionless, the engine steaming, hissing like a sleeping monster. Earl darted between cars, climbed over the hitch, and hurried down the path, kicking an old liquor bottle out of the way. He picked up a stone and flung it at the train. He scooped another, and another, and threw them with rising fury, suddenly angry at the train. Dragged his parents' car down the tracks for nearly a mile, crushed his mother the same way Jimmy crushed the spiders in Larry's basement, ripped his father in half, and finally pushed the car out of the way as if it were a toy.

A series of clanks echoed up and down the train—the sudden grip of the hitches—and the train rolled slowly westward, back the way it had come. He watched until it cleared the shunting rails, the shunting rails closed, and he continued along the path to the pool behind Calman Industries.

Sumac, blood-red from the October cold, rimmed the pool. No one ever came to the pool. He looked at the drainpipe leading from the back of the factory. A small trickle of shiny liquid emptied into the pool. Several barrels stood off to one side, each coated by a thin layer of lead-lined concrete. Earl found his fishing rod—a broken broomstick with a string tied to the end—sat on one of the barrels, and cast out.

He knew there were no fish here. Nothing could live in the pool. But it was fun to pretend. There was no greater place for make-believe than the pool. No one ever came here, no one knew of the things he sometimes saw in the pool. The rain came down lighter now and the wind abated. No one knew how the pool sometimes glowed, how it hummed with the resonance of his discontent, his

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fear and unhappiness, how it sometimes flickered with his love for Darlene and his pity for Norman. The rain stopped and the pool turned as smooth as a varnished floor. He had seen Norman's face many times in the pool, floating next to the faces of his dead mother and father, and he knew what the reflection of the little boy meant. It meant Norman Pike was going to die.

Earl leaned over, a morbid compulsion forcing him to look. Norman's face floated into view, then Sonny's face (Mr. McGreer's dog who had been hit and killed by a car two weeks ago), then the face of Mrs. Kingenfelter, the lady up the street with the funny accent who cooked for them last summer when Larry had to stay in the clinic and Darlene had to go every day. Mrs. Kingenfelter was dead now. The pool knew she was going to die, showed her face only hours before she collapsed in her front hall, choked to death on a chicken bone.

Earl put his fishing rod down, reached in his jacket, and pulled out a Polaroid snapshot of Larry. He looked at the glossy photograph. It showed Larry in jeans and T-shirt, cigarettes rolled in the left sleeve, serpent tattoo twisting around his arm to his studded leather watchband, thumbs hooked in his pockets. Taken a week after he got home from the clinic, his face pale, skull-like, his arms bony and thin.

He flipped the photograph over and held it to the pool. To use the pool as a murder weapon had occurred to him only last night. He thought he would see a change, expected the pool to glow, to hum, to in some way guarantee an imminent death for Larry, but nothing happened. He held it there for five minutes and still nothing happened.

Finally he took it away, disappointed. It wasn't going to work. He couldn't influence the pool. The pool had a mind of its own. The pool was a shadow of the past and a mirror of the future, that was all.

When he got back to the house an ambulance stood in the drive. Fear numbed him like an ice-cold shower, and he was certain Larry had finally killed Darlene. Jimmy peered from the upstairs dormer, his sharp angular face flashing red in the ambulance light. Two paramedics brought Larry out on a stretcher; he was wrapped in a pale-orange sheet and there was a big tube stuck down his throat. Darlene came out onto the porch, the side of her face puffy, her lip bleeding, the sleeve of her white blouse torn. She lifted her bird-like hand to her lip, cast a nervous glance back into the kitchen as if she thought Larry was still in there ready to beat her up, then turned

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and watched the ambulance attendants take Larry away, her shoulders slowly sinking in relief.

Heart attack. That's what Mrs. Messick, the government lady, told them later. Seventy percent of his main artery had been blocked. But Earl knew otherwise. Earl knew it was the pool.

After the funeral they sat down with Darlene in the kitchen. They were going to have a talk.

"Larry's work has a bit of money for me," she said. "But it's not much." She took a cigarette from the half-empty pack on the table, stuck it in her mouth, and lit it with a nervous hand. "We're not going to be able to rent this house any more." She took a large pull on her cigarette, opened her mouth, let the smoke stick there in a solid block, then swallowed it whole. "I might not be able to keep both of you. I may have to get Mrs. Messick to find another spot for one of you."

Earl loved Darlene. Her hair was luxuriant, a shade of red found only in oak leaves the last week of November, and tumbled around her slender shoulders in thick curls. Her green eyes shone from her pretty freckled face like the polished pieces of 7UP glass he found at the beach. Before Norman got sick, she had always worn ruby-red lipstick. He could hardly believe his ears. He loved her with a raw, vigorous, and devastating love, an untamed pre-pubescent love unlike anything he had ever experienced, and he knew he couldn't lose her. One of them had to go, that's all Earl could think about, and he was going to make sure it wasn't him.

So after he and Jimmy had fixed sugar-on-white-bread for supper, he waited alone in their bedroom looking out at the ruins of the old folks' home. When he heard Jimmy watching television downstairs and Darlene singing Norman to sleep in the front bedroom, he walked to Jimmy's dresser and took out Jimmy's small photo album. Each page was big enough for one picture. The imitation steerhide cover was embossed with a color postcard of the Rockies. He found a good shot of Jimmy. Jimmy stood with his parents beside a beachfront hotel leaning against a Ford Tempo with Florida license plates. In this shot he had a brushcut. His parents were both overweight, especially his mother, whose stomach strained at the buttons of her faded flower-print smock. Earl took the photograph from the vinyl sleeve, put the album back, and pulled on his jacket.

* * *

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He hurried to the pool, feeling like a fugitive. When he got to Calman Industries he looked up and down the tracks, making sure no one had followed him. Rain clouds moved in from the west, low and menacing. He had to do this quickly. It would be dark soon and the pool might not pick up the reflection of Jimmy's photograph.

He sat on one of the barrels and looked across the pool to the drainpipe. He pulled the photograph out and held it facedown to the pool.

Nothing happened. He stared intently at the pool, looking for a sign, but the pool remained dim, opaque, ugly in its absolute stillness.

But then it began to glimmer, to glow, and a faint white light focused—coalesced into a bright spot just below Earl's face. The light intensified, reached toward him. He pulled the photograph away, jumped off the barrel, and ran around to a sumac-covered hummock. The light followed him, but without the reflection of Jimmy's picture, it lost strength and finally disappeared.

He stood there, unable to breathe, the afterimage of the light clinging to his eyes. Raindrops suddenly stippled the surface of the pool, jerked him out of his trance, and he looked up. Bolt lightning etched a crisp silver line to the west and a drumbeat of thunder echoed across the sky. It was going to pour.

By the time he got back to the house, large, closely-packed drops pelted the yard with machine-gun rapidity. He expected to find an ambulance in the driveway—to take Jimmy's dead body away—but except for Larry's rusted pickup, the driveway was empty.

He went in through the back door—as usual the house smelled of Norman's vomit—stopping when he saw the pale-blue glow of the television coming from the dining room doorway. He approached cautiously, thinking he would find Jimmy's dead body on the couch, but there was no one sitting on the couch.

He walked to the front of the stairs and listened. He mounted the steps. At the top he put his ear to Darlene's door. Silence. That was good. It meant Norman was sleeping, and sleep for the desperately ill boy was the best of all possible signs. He proceeded down the hall, where he saw lamp light casting a weak glow from the open door of his and Jimmy's bedroom. He stopped and once again he listened. All he could hear was the steady drip of the bathtub tap from down the hall. A sudden squall blew rain against the roof.

He peered around the doorway.

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His own blanket and sheet had been torn from his bed and all his clothes had been stuffed into a green garbage bag. Jimmy's photo album sat open on top of the dresser. Jimmy's shoes and jacket were gone, and the window was open, rattling in its casement. Rain arced in under the frame, soaking the radiator.

He walked to the window, looked out at the worn old roof, and, in the last flinty light of day, saw a big patch of shingles missing. He peered down to the ground where, in the square of pink-tinted fluorescent light coming from the kitchen window, he saw Jimmy Dinsmore, his leg twisted behind his back, his forehead soft and mushy, his blood washing away in the rain.

The dreams began that night: after Mrs. Messick had come with her forms, after the police had asked their questions, after the blue-blazered men from Forest Hill Funeral Chapel had taken Jimmy Dinsmore away.

He dreamed of the light in the pool, only it wasn't in the pool any more, it was in the air, level with his eyes, coming toward him, growing larger and larger, until it got so close he could see nothing else. And with the light came the noise, a howling that blocked out all other noise, like a choir of a hundred car horns. In the dream he had to get away from the light, but no matter how fast he ran the light kept coming.

For the next three weeks—while Norman's grip on life slowly ebbed—he dreamed the same dream every night. The light, the noise, the running.

He came home from school Friday afternoon four weeks later to find a note on the kitchen table. "Dear Earl, Have gone to the hospital with Norman. Darlene."

He scrounged together some nickels and dimes and took the bus down to the hospital. When he got there he found Darlene in the waiting room. Her eyes were puffy from crying and she looked scared.

"They got him in the ICU," she said, her voice raw with worry. "They don't think he's going to make it. His temperature's a hundred and five."

Earl stayed with Darlene for three hours, guarded her purse and Norman's bag while she went outside and had a cigarette. The doctor came to them at nine o'clock and again at ten-thirty, to tell them there was no change. Darlene finally told Earl to go home.

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"The movers are coming at eight o'clock tomorrow," she said, "and one of us has to be there to let them in."

He gave her a kiss, the first kiss he had ever given her—after all, he was just a government ward, a way for Darlene to supplement her income—and the gesture surprised her. She took him in her arms and stroked his head.

"Everything's going to be all right," she said. "You go home now. I'll come home when I can."

But he didn't go home; he went to the pool, even though it was well past midnight.

The pool glowed fitfully in the nighttime security lights coming from the back windows of Calman Industries. He walked through the sumac, now leafless, and perched on one of the barrels, feeling both afraid and exhilarated to be here so late. He sat there gazing into the pool, waiting for a sign that the pool would somehow help Norman, but nothing happened, not even the dreaded light that came to haunt him in his dreams.

He forced his sleep away, not bothering to count the hours, stayed sitting on that barrel until he shivered, until he could hardly keep his eyes open, wishing and hoping that Norman might get better.

One by one the stars faded and the sky turned smoky blue, silhouetting the jumbled roof peaks and cowled chimney tops of the factories and warehouses along the railway tracks. Finally, he got down from the barrels and began walking home—the movers would be there in an hour and he had to let them in. He knew that he no longer believed in the power of the pool, that the deaths of Larry and Jimmy were purely coincidental, and that when the pool hummed it was really the sound of the train that had killed his parents, and that the glow was really the killer train's light. And in understanding that he finally let go of his parents. Next month he would be thirteen, and he knew he could no longer operate on the principles of make-believe, knew that he had to bury his parents once and for all.

When he got back to the house, dawn brightened the eastern sky with a lemony strip of light. Larry's pickup was parked in the drive—Darlene was back. He braced himself.

She was in the kitchen putting knives and forks into a small box. She stopped what she was doing.

"Where have you been?"

"Is he all right?" he asked.

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She closed her eyes, lifted her chin, then opened them. She looked down at him and smiled, brushing a stray lock from his forehead.

"His temperature broke," she said. "He's going to be all right." She took his face in both hands, leaned down, and gave him a kiss, a motherly kiss, a kiss such as he hadn't had since his own mother had died. "I think we're going to be all right."

Nothing could be said for the power of the pool; but something might be said for the power of hope, even the hope of a twelve-year-old boy.

"Now, come on," she said. "The movers are going to be here in an hour and there's still a lot to do."

For the first time since Norman got sick, Darlene put on some ruby-red lipstick.

DETECTIVERSE

TO THE PAROLE BOARD

by DIXIE J. WHITTED

Headstrong housewife Henrietta
Fed her husband strychnine stew.
Now she says she's coping better—
Can she come and live with you?

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a *NEW* short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

Digby went on to explain how Adelaide Dow had spoiled his working life in the big town. There was no harm in letting the landlady know this. She would see for herself what a nasty piece of work Adelaide was when she arrived on Friday. "I truly hated her," he concluded. "I suppose on some level I still do. You noticed it. But I'm trying to do the right thing."

"Good for you. Revenge is a bad idea. You only end up hurting yourself . . ."

THE PERFECT VICTIM

by WILLIAM BANKIER

Digby Staples looked into the kitchen where his landlady was watching porridge. "Mrs. Peterson, would it be all right for me to invite a friend next weekend? She'd stay in the front room." His heart was pounding. The decision was made, he was now embarked upon his campaign to murder Adelaide Dow.

"She pays, she stays." The tiny woman lifted a plug of boiled oats on the end of a wooden spoon. "Want some breakfast?"

"I'm due at the bank," Digby said, hitching his white linen cuffs, adjusting the knot in the Hawaiian tie. "I'll grab something on my way." A brick-orange cat was positioned like a cookie jar on the counter. It nuzzled toaster crumbs as the boarder tweaked its ear. "So long, Punkin." The cat acknowledged its name with a rasp of tongue on the back of Digby's hand.

"You were going to pick up a bottle of Van Holst," Mrs. Peterson called as he went out the door.

* * *

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Having lived and worked most of his life in Albany, Digby Staples was still getting used to Algonquin Landing. Mrs. Peterson's house was on the east side of the lake. As he headed for the bridge, he could see a mile away across flat water the cluster of buildings that made up the town's commercial center. On the bridge, walking fast, he looked down the lake past the yacht mooring to the pier. Beyond, wooded hills threw a ragged profile against the sky. Not quite hidden by pines were colorful roofs indicating where the rich people lived. The pier was low to the water, a dark straight line, ending abruptly like an implied threat.

Digby went into The Corner and picked up a large coffee to go and two jelly donuts. The man behind the counter had once been a pro boxer. His name escaped the bank teller, but the face was familiar. Digby took one of the donuts from the bag and ate it on his way along the street to the brass-plated doors of Eastern Conglomerate Bank. What a relief to walk inside this establishment and not feel panic and depression. What a change from the bank in Albany, and the cruel supervision of Adelaide Dow.

Greeting his colleagues, unlocking his vault, getting his money in order for the day, Digby bit down on painful memories. Adelaide was paranoid. How did she ever gain and hold the Albany manager's job? How do all the emotional cripples of the business world scramble into positions of power and hold onto them?

It had to do with survival and evolution. In his mind's eye, Digby saw a primeval limpet, brainless and ugly, clamped onto a rock in some tidal pool.

Adelaide used people. They were no different to her, Digby believed, than the bank's computer consoles. You switched them on and off. When one broke down you replaced it. Now he would use this characteristic of hers to lure her to Algonquin Landing. He would offer Adelaide Dow a new pool of people to manipulate.

Digby remembered the way it used to be. Adelaide called a meeting almost every morning. The tellers and accountants sat in upholstered chairs while Adelaide went over procedures and grievances. Three pieces of ID needed on all checks cashed. Always refer to the file of signature cards. A siege mentality was fostered and maintained. Digby would swallow anger as he detected a half-hidden smile on Adelaide Dow's thin features. She was enjoying dishing out fear.

His own view of banking was so different. Of all the customers who came through the door on any day, 99 percent of them were

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law-abiding people. White, Chinese, black, or Hispanic, whether they had on a business suit or worker's clothing, or even if they were students, they were honest individuals just trying to cash a pay-check or withdraw their own funds. The teller's job was to greet these people with warmth and courtesy. Not to confront them as potential thieves.

Nor did Adelaide Dow's poison cease flowing when the bank closed its doors at four o'clock. Now she began heckling the tellers who were trying to balance their cash. "Come on, get it done! Ten minutes till the courier gets here! Digby, I need your tapes for the bag!"

He could not work under the conditions she imposed. Trying to get it right, he hit wrong keys on his calculator. The money-counter malfunctioned, it ate a five dollar bill. Elastic bands snapped as he secured packs of twenties. The courier was at the door! He was not ready!

Digby would walk out onto the street after five o'clock feeling like a survivor leaving a battlefield. His senses were shocked, his heart was beating too fast. Living alone, he had nobody to talk to. He tried self-hypnosis to calm himself down and that helped a little bit.

One Friday, as he was about to go home, Adelaide Dow asked him to come to her desk. He sat there while she made three telephone calls, her slate eyes on him all the while. She was tall, not an ounce of extra flesh on her bones; a long-beaked wading bird in a pin-striped suit.

"Now," she said, folding her hands on the clear glass surface, "it isn't working, is it. You can't seem to handle the pressure. We really must be able to meet company deadlines."

Digby felt his eyes filling up. This was terrible. All his life he had worked in jobs where he was praised for his aptitude and his attitude. Now here was this bitch about to cut him adrift! He heard himself saying, "Actually, I'm not staying. I'm leaving town. I was about to give in my notice."

Then he saw the tiny smile on her face. He was not mistaken. Adelaide Dow had spotted the tears in his eyes, she was registering his distress. And she was deriving satisfaction from it.

That must have been the moment, although he did not make the connection until some time later, when he realized Adelaide Dow would be the perfect victim.

EastCon Bank in Algonquin Landing opened its doors at ten. The flow of customers was steady but not heavy. The atmosphere behind

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the windows was free of tension because the manager was a civilized individual. Always a loner, Digby ate lunch out of the machines in the staff room upstairs, reading a movie magazine somebody had left behind on the sofa.

At closing, he went by the liquor store and bought a bottle of Van Holst, as instructed by Mrs. Peterson. She had a taste for the pungent Geneva-type gin and she had passed it on, heaven help his liver, to Digby Staples. Then he stopped at the shop on the east side of the bridge and picked up two orders of fish and chips, wrapped in newspaper. It was advertised as "English style," and for all Digby knew, never having been outside New York State, it was.

"When will your friend be coming?" the landlady asked. The table was cleared after their meal and she had provided two decks of cards. They were ready to start playing double solitaire and sipping gin from tiny glasses. Both activities were enhancements to idle conversation which would be, as always, the main feature of the evening.

"I haven't asked her yet."

"Sounds like you. Plenty of smoke, not much fire."

"I want to help her find a job."

"In this burg?"

"She's manager of the bank where I used to work. I read in the paper where they're closing a lot of branches." This was true. "The economy. Her branch is one. She'll have to relocate."

"She's lucky to have a friend like you."

Digby held his breath while the first taste of gin went down. It was a bit like drinking paint thinner. "She'd agree with you." He had never let on to Adelaide that he hated her. They had parted on good terms—that's the impression with which her ego and Digby's poker face had left her. He was pretty sure she would come when he invited her.

Laying out his cards as Mrs. Peterson laid out hers, playing the simple game, Digby had time to think. The hypnosis was the uncertain element in his plan. And there was no way to test it but to do it. Every subject was different. If Adelaide would not or could not cooperate, all bets were off. But he had certainly been able to make it work the last time.

It was when he was a senior in high school that Digby taught himself the art of hypnosis. He found a book on the subject in his father's library. His father died when Digby was fourteen. A lawyer and an avid fisherman, the senior Staples was struck by lightning

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while deep-water casting from a skiff on Lake Champlain.

Digby's mother remarried a year later. His stepfather, a minor-league second baseman, was on the road a lot. His new wife followed the team in her new Mercedes, a purchase which absorbed much of the insurance money. Digby had no quarrel with his stepfather. He found him to be a decent man, although he had trouble turning the double play. Digby shunned the ballpark, found the games endless. He preferred to spend his spare time in the musty room where his father's books slid and shifted like shale in a geological fault.

The hypnosis manual was easy to follow. When he had absorbed the technique, Digby tried it out with a friend after school. His aptitude was remarkable, blessed as he was with a sonorous baritone voice. Soon he was stretching his friend between two chairs and sitting on him.

Post-hypnotic suggestion came next. Digby's earliest experiment was the one he intended to repeat with Adelaide Dow. It was simplicity itself. "When you hear the word 'cradle,' " he had told his friend years ago, "you will begin to run forward in a straight line. You will run as fast as you can until you are tired. Then you will stop." These instructions were followed by the usual disclaimer that the subject would remember nothing about them when roused from the hypnotic trance.

It had been an exciting day. Digby and friend went for a walk on the playground. He was not sure whether the trick would work. But when he uttered the word "cradle," his friend took off across the field like an olympic sprinter. He covered half a mile before he wearied and pulled up.

The pier at Algonquin Landing was shorter than half a mile.

Adelaide Dow's home number was in Digby's little book. It had been necessary to call her one time in the late evening in Albany when, overcome with fear, he decided he could not go to work on the following day.

Mrs. Peterson told him, "Dial direct." The telephone bill was to hand. She studied it. "This thing is beyond redemption anyway." She crumpled the pages into a ball and skipped it across the carpet in the direction of the cat. Punkin stared at her as if to say, "Why would you throw paper at me for no reason at all?"

Digby dialed and waited. She answered on the second ring.

"Yes?"

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The irritation in her tone of voice was all the reassurance he needed to persuade him that he was about to take a giant step for mankind. "It's me, Adelaide. Digby Staples. How's it going?"

"Rotten. Where did you materialize from?"

"Algonquin Landing. I live here. I read something about the bank closing branches."

"It's a personal disaster. Tellers can always find a place. But I'm an executive. I really needed this."

"Would you consider moving?"

"Depends."

"I'm at Eastern Conglomerate here. This is the main bank in town. Our manager is about to retire. If you'd come down here, I could introduce you around."

"I wouldn't be caught dead in a place like that."

Digby was ready. "You don't understand. This branch needs shaking up. I've already told the owners what an efficiency expert you are. They want to meet you. If you come on board, you could really cut back the deadwood.

She hesitated. "Why are you doing this for me? I fired you."

"I'm doing it for myself. I've been seeing a shrink." Digby surprised himself with how easily his prepared story flowed. "I've got to come to terms with the past. What you did was not personal. It was for the good of the company. I see that now. I respect you for it."

"You're not just joking?"

"I would never joke with you, Adelaide."

She was intrigued. "It might be worth a visit."

They made arrangements for her to drive in on the following Friday night. Adelaide would spend the weekend getting to know Algonquin Landing with Digby as her guide. Then, on Monday morning, he would bring her in to meet management.

"What's going on?" Mrs. Peterson said after he put down the telephone.

"Sorry?"

"That woman could only hear your sugary words. But I could see your face. I was watching whatever it is in your eyes."

Digby experienced alarm. But the feeling passed quickly. He was safe. Mrs. Peterson knew nothing about the hypnotism. He and Adelaide would be alone when he planted the suggestion in her subconscious mind. So when she went for her long sprint on the short pier, it would be judged suicide. And why not? Her life was in a state of upheaval.

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"You noticed some residual animosity," he confessed. "I've been trying to suppress it." He went on to explain how Adelaide Dow had spoiled his working life in the big town. There was no harm in letting the landlady know this. She would see for herself what a nasty piece of work Adelaide was when she arrived on Friday. "I truly hated her," he concluded. "I suppose on some level I still do. You noticed it. But I'm trying to do the right thing."

"Good for you. Revenge is a bad idea. You only end up hurting yourself. Better to forgive and forget. Put feelings of anger behind you."

"Easy to say."

"I know. Peterson was a bad example. It did him in."

"Your husband?"

"I told you he worked for the post office as a letter carrier. And he died. I never said how."

"What happened?"

"There are good routes and bad routes. He had the best route in town. Then it was taken away from him and given to the postmaster's nephew. Peterson never stopped hating that young man. He carried the grudge every day while he carried the mail. Even though it was the postmaster's doing, my husband went on hating the nephew. Until he got hold of this bomb."

"What?"

"Dynamite and a clock ticking inside a package. I never found out who it was to or from. But it was addressed to somebody on Peterson's route. He became suspicious, opened an end of the package, and saw the wires."

"He should have gone to the police."

"Of course. But my husband was consumed with hatred of the postmaster's nephew. So he taped up the package and re-addressed it to the nephew himself. And he took it to his home and carried it up the walk and onto the porch. He was putting it inside the screen door when it went off."

Digby sniffed his glass and set it down without drinking. "Did he die?"

"In a week."

"How do you know the story?"

"He confessed when I was sitting by his hospital bed. I told him what I'm telling you. Holding a grudge, seeking revenge, is self-defeating." The landlady capped the bottle. "Let it go, Digby, before you do yourself in."

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On Friday, around seven in the evening, Adelaide Dow blew into town like a cold wind from Lake Ontario. Digby introduced her to Mrs. Peterson, then stood in the doorway of the front room while the visitor peered out the window at the street, the slice of lake between houses, the dark hills beyond. "I can't believe I'm doing this," she said.

"You'll like the bank on Monday."

"I hope so." She looked pensive. "Is there really a lot of deadwood on staff?"

"At least five people could go and never be missed," Digby said. "Let's get something to eat."

"Do they have a restaurant in this place?"

"Two. One has a license and the other doesn't."

They went where they could order wine. Adelaide mellowed. "Look at you," she said across the fettucini alfredo. "Trying so hard to get me to like you."

"I'm sorry we weren't better friends." He refilled her glass. "Perhaps it needed more effort."

"You make me nervous, you always did." An idea that pleased her entered Adelaide's mind. "What if you're one of the ones I cut adrift? Supposing I fire you again?"

"Never happen. I learned from experience. I'm a better teller now because of the way you shook me up."

The preposterous lie rang as true to Adelaide as a silver bell. "I'm beginning to be glad I came," she said.

He showed her the main street. He showed her the lake from the near end of the pier. "We'll walk out there tomorrow. The view from the far end is great." He guided her back to the boarding house, pointing out interesting homes and gardens on the way.

She was excited now. "I'm not sure I can sleep," she said. "I'm impatient for the Monday meeting with the EastCon people."

"You need your rest. I can help you sleep."

Standing in the doorway of the room, she gave him a look. "Don't even think of it, Digby."

"I didn't mean that. I can do hypnotism."

"Go on."

"I've been into it since high school. Nothing crazy, I don't make folks undress in public. Just a few words to calm you down."

"Are you serious?"

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She almost went under right there. A very good subject indeed. She turned and he followed her into the room, closing the door behind them. "Sit there," he suggested and she settled obediently onto the edge of the bed. He pulled over a chair and sat facing her, close up. "Now, relax. Let go completely. You're very tired. You want to rest. Your eyelids are heavy. Your eyelids want to close. Let your eyelids close. That's right. Now . . . I am going to tell you a word. The word is 'cradle.' Say the word 'cradle.' "

"Cradle."

"The next time you hear the word 'cradle,' you will begin to run. You will run as fast as you can, straight ahead. Tell me, Adelaide, what will you do the next time you hear the word 'cradle'?"

"I will run as fast as I can. Straight ahead."

"Very good. Now, when I count to three, you will wake up. You will not remember anything of what we have just said. One, two, three."

Adelaide opened her eyes. She looked at Digby, she looked around the room. "Was I out?"

"You were in a trance."

"How long?"

"Less than a minute."

"Wow. I feel like I've been asleep for an hour."

"It works." He got up and went to the door. "You'll rest now. Good night."

Digby Staples was the one who had trouble sleeping. It occurred to him that he had already committed murder. The deed was done, the woman was as good as dead. Tomorrow, on the pier, he would utter the trigger word. Adelaide would sprint into eternity. The police would conclude (and why not?) that a troubled woman, about to lose her job, had decided to end her life. The perfect murder; the perfect victim.

Especially since she did not know how to swim. That fact had been established long ago in Centralia. Adelaide had boycotted a staff party at the beach for that very reason.

Had he said too much to Mrs. Peterson? Digby struggled with twisted sheets, pounded the comfortless pillow. The landlady's lecture on revenge suggested she had sensed what he might have in mind. What would she think when Adelaide turned up dead twenty-four hours later? Never mind, he was safe. There would be witnesses on the pier, strangers to testify the woman had jumped into the

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water by herself. And nobody knew about the hypnotism.

In the morning, Adelaide was up bright and early. She arrived at Digby's bedroom door with two cups of coffee on a tray. "You can put me to sleep any time." She raised his blind, dragged back the drapes. "It's a day and a half," was her assessment. As Digby sipped the strong brew and grudgingly admitted to himself that this was sort of neat, she went on, "I surprised our landlady in the kitchen. Does she always feed that cat on the table?"

"Punkin came aboard after her husband died. It's replaced the old man and then some."

"She's taking it in for booster shots today, I think she said. She was spelling everything so the cat wouldn't catch on."

"You can't tip your hand to a cat. If you do, it dematerializes and you see it next week."

Adelaide finished her coffee. "You promised to show me the lake."

"Right." The condemned woman was impatient to meet her fate. "Let me throw on some clothes and we'll go."

Ten minutes later, it became crowded in the vestibule. As Digby was about to open the front door for Adelaide, Mrs. Peterson appeared carrying a portapet box with Punkin inside—one angry eye at an airhole.

"Let me help you," the visitor said. She took the box from the landlady's hand. "He's heavier than I expected."

"Where's the vet's office?" Digby asked.

"Other side of the bridge."

"Can we go that way?" Adelaide asked. "I don't care if it's a longer walk."

The trio set out towards the main road, Adelaide in front because the box was bulky, Digby and Mrs. Peterson a pace behind. They were nearing the corner when the old lady called, "Be careful now with my precious. He's like a baby in his cradle."

Adelaide began to run. Holding the portapet firmly in her right hand, she sprinted straight ahead towards the intersection. Saturday morning traffic on the bridge road was heavy. There were vans, private cars, a bus, two lanes speeding in either direction.

Mrs. Peterson was screaming. She had no hope of catching the fleeting girl. Digby took off after her. Adelaide might get hit by a truck, she might die. Then again, she might not. But she was carrying Punkin. He could not bear the thought of that sweet animal, trapped in a box, being carried to its death.

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"Stop her!" Mrs. Peterson's pleas drove him on. Adelaide was entering traffic, running fast. A car swerved. Horns began to blow. Digby was on her, grasping her shoulders, spinning her around, glimpsing the wild uncertainty in her eyes as she sensed the danger and wondered why this was happening. He managed to redirect her progress back towards the sidewalk and Mrs. Peterson, who seized her and held her, both of them sharing a grip on the cat-box handle.

Digby was not so fortunate. Physical reaction to the push that saved Adelaide sent him off balance into the road. A tractor-trailer could not stop in time. He was knocked a glancing blow, ending up prone on a grassy verge.

The paramedics were there in minutes. Digby was examined where he lay, then loaded onto a gurney and placed inside the ambulance with tubes already feeding life-saving substances into his veins.

His next view of the world was past the halo of light surrounding the curly blonde head of a sympathetic nurse. "You're going to be all right, Mr. Staples," she reassured him. "Just relax and leave everything to us."

Digby dozed. He awoke to find Adelaide Dow sitting by the bed on a straight-backed chair. She was pretending to read a magazine, narrow eyes focused far off. He cleared his throat.

"You're awake," she said. "They tell me you'll be okay."

Digby's sedated system managed to register alarm. He told himself she could not know anything of the posthypnotic suggestion. But he decided to test her memory. "Why did you race into the street?"

"I've been trying to figure that out. One minute we were walking and talking. Then I was off and running."

"It's one of those mysteries," Digby concluded, "that will never be understood."

"Whatever happened," she said, "you saved my life. They told me how you sacrificed yourself. I never knew you were the type. I've always put you down as a wimp. I mean, having me come here and finding me a job after what I did to you. I don't care what you said last night, your behavior shows zero backbone."

Righteous anger filled Digby to the limit. It felt good. "You're deluding yourself," he told her. He had no further use for her or for the pretense that he liked her. "I was saving the cat."

Adelaide went away. Mrs. Peterson came in. "What did you say to your friend? She told me she's leaving town."

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"I'm letting her go. I've decided I don't need her to hate any more."

"That's healthy," the landlady said. "Reminds me of when I said goodbye to that husband of mine."

"When he was in the hospital?"

"Before that. When I bought the bomb that killed him."

"You said he discovered it. Addressed to somebody on his route."

"That's the story I told the police." Mrs. Peterson sat on the chair beside Digby's bed. "He was a bad husband. He hated cats. And there were other, lesser faults. I decided to be rid of him. So I saved my money and paid a man who used to live in your room. He was retired from the CIA. I asked him one night when we were drinking our gin if he knew how to make an explosive device. He said he did."

"You'll give me a relapse," Digby said.

"The rest was easy. I told Peterson the timer was set for three o'clock. Then I set it for one-thirty."

Digby thought about what he had just heard. Then he said, "What about all that stuff you told me, the harm there is in hating somebody?"

"Q.E.D. I didn't waste my life hating my husband. I got rid of him." The old woman patted Digby's hand. "The best you could do is stop hating Adelaide. You're too much of a softy to kill anybody."

Mrs. Peterson decided it was time to end her visit. The patient was looking stressed. "Hurry up and get better and come home," she said from the doorway. "Punkin wants me to throw you a party for saving his life."

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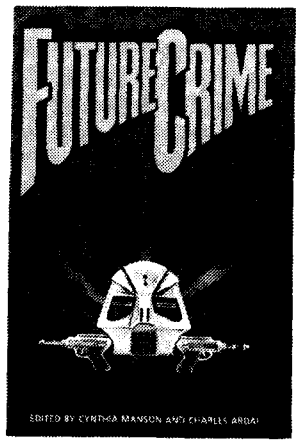

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a *NEW* short story by

TERRY MULLINS

"I hope you can persuade the police commissioner to put more men on this case," Father Jacques began. "All the drug dealers in the city can't do as much damage as this lunatic who is threatening to blow up St. Patrick's . . . If necessary," Jacques continued, "we ought to use soldiers. They aren't doing anything but drilling. Let's get them to work finding this maniac."

A vision flashed before Bay's mind of the infantry—supported no doubt by tanks, artillery, and helicopters—fighting its way through the New York traffic. He took a deep breath to clear his head . . .

THE THREAT TO THE CATHEDRAL

by TERRY MULLINS

It was shortly before two in the afternoon on the first day of a cold December when Pierce Dake, Special Assistant to the Director of Operations of the CIA, entered Dr. Bay's office. With him was a man dressed in a black cape lined with scarlet, a man of dramatic, even melodramatic appearance. He could have been a stage magician, an actor playing Dracula, or a baritone dressed as Mephistopheles. Dake introduced him. "This is Cardinal Perez, head of security for the Archdiocese of New York. He has the letters with him."

Cheiro Bay stared at the cardinal in delight. He seldom encountered spectacular persons and this was one who pulled no punches. Tall and lean, with an ascetic face and expressive hands, the cardinal invested his every move with panache. Bay half expected that the churchman would produce the letters out of thin air, but instead Perez reached under his cape and brought forth a black

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velvet pouch which he gave to Bay. Even so, he made the presentation as theatrical as if the pouch had come from a cloud of blue smoke.

"Please be seated," Bay said. He laid the pouch on his desk and sat down without opening it. "There are three letters in here?"

"Three handwritten letters," Dake replied, "delivered to Cardinal Perez personally, as it were."

"As it were?"

The priest spoke for the first time. His voice was no disappointment. It was deep and sonorous. "In each case the letter was left where I and only I would be sure to find it. The first was placed in my confessional. The last was in my breviary."

"Then it is bound to have been left by someone who works fairly closely with you."

"That follows, but there are hundreds who do so."

Bay looked inquisitively at Dake, who answered the unasked query. "The New York City Police, the FBI, and the CIA are working together on this. We have a list of fifty-seven persons who might have placed one or more of the letters, six of them might have placed all three. We're doing what we do best. What we want from you is some clue from the letters themselves."

"What do your own handwriting experts say?"

"They were all written by the same person. Beyond that, we would like your unbiased opinion."

"You would have that anyway," Bay replied. "Well, let us look at the letters." He was somewhat surprised to find the pouch closed with Velcro. It seemed incongruous. Inside were three sheets of ordinary typing paper with neat writing covering each one.

He studied each of the three letters carefully without reading them. "Yes, they were written by the same person. Have your experts compared the writing with that of the fifty-seven who might have left one or more?"

"Yes. None of them match." There was something in Dake's voice which Bay could not identify but which was out of character with his usual manner. Bay made a mental note to pursue the matter later when he could get Dake alone.

"I shall have to subject the letters to a great many tests," Bay said. "You will leave them with me?"

"I would prefer not to," the cardinal replied, "but Mr. Dake has persuaded me that you are the best, possibly the only, hope we have to find the sender. We do as you suggest."

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He paused and let his cloak drape over the arm of the chair so that its scarlet lining dominated the room. "Can you give me some conclusions now?"

There was something imperious about the man. He was not inquiring about the possibility of immediate results. He was demanding them.

Dake, who knew that the other two were sparring as friendly duelists, was prepared to keep quiet.

Bay smiled and said, "Nothing consequential, I'm afraid. The writer used a ball-point pen. That limits the amount of offhand information I can glean. I can, however, suggest that the letters may have been dictated."

Dake sat upright. "How can you tell that?" he asked.

"Because in each letter there are small but significant changes in the rhythm of the writing. Several things could cause them. The writer may have been writing from notes. He could have got up and paced about between paragraphs. Or—and this seems most likely—someone could have dictated a block of material, then paused to look over what had been written, and gone on to the next block of material. After each pause in the dictation, the scribe would have resumed with a slightly different rhythm."

"If that's the case, we're dealing with more than one person," Dake said. Again there was a slightly out of key tone. Bay had, apparently, hit the trouble spot again. Dake was concerned that he might be dealing with a gang.

"That has always been probable," the cardinal said decisively. Clearly Bay's finding reinforced a position that Perez had been maintaining. "Anything more?"

"Just one thing. The scribe was quite sober when writing the first two letters. On the third he had been drinking. He was not drunk, but he had been drinking."

Cardinal Perez rose. "Thank you," he said, and he made it sound as if he were bestowing knighthood on Bay. "I had thought that Mr. Dake might be clutching at straws in consulting you, but now I feel we may be getting somewhere after all. How long will your tests require?"

"I can have results of the first batch for you tomorrow. Shall I bring them to you, or—"

"No. We will come here. We wish to interrupt you as little as possible." The cardinal was already on his way to the door, sweeping through the office like a Musketeer.

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Dake shrugged resignedly and followed.

Bay wished that Dake might have stayed, but he understood. He was sure he would return in an hour or so.

Cheiro Bay settled back to read the first letter:

"The government of the United States has illegally seized and unlawfully imprisoned Diego Naranja, a citizen of the Republic of Barbados. It seized him in violation of International Law and transported him to the Dominican Republic and from there to the United States.

"Since efforts of his family and friends have failed to secure his release, indeed have left him more securely incarcerated, a group of us who are upholders of International Law have decided to take matters into our own hands. We demand that the United States release him.

"We have taken great pains to obtain a room from which we can fire an extremely powerful rocket at St. Patrick's Cathedral. If Diego Naranja is not released before Christmas Eve, we will fire the rocket at the cathedral during mass if you are foolish enough to celebrate mass in spite of this warning. You, not we, will be guilty of mass murder in that case. Show this letter to the President of the United States. Tell him to release Diego Naranja."

Dake had given him the contents of the letters over the telephone, but in a lifetime spent in handwriting research, Bay had acquired a feel for written documents which went well beyond mere words.

Bay had, in fact, spent a quarter of a century turning handwriting analysis from a parlor game into a science. He had seen the work of Abbe Michon developed by Levinson and Zubin into a complex web of statistics and charts, transformed by popular writers into graphology, and shorn by handwriting experts of its interpretive character and made into an exact tool for detecting forgery.

Through it all he had persisted, discarding meaningless statistical baggage, testing Pulver's theory of zones and Klage's theory of rhythm, resisting equally the romantic and the psychoanalytic interpreters, and gradually establishing himself as the foremost authority in his field. But during most of that time he had felt frustrated at not seeing any practical application of his work.

A chance encounter with Pierce Dake while attending a convention in Madrid had given him opportunity to use his skill beyond the academic world. Three times since then he had proved his value to the CIA, an organization of which he did not completely approve

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but which trusted him—or at least trusted his work. Now they were turning to him again in a truly fateful situation.

He was quite certain that the person who wrote the letters had not composed them. The one who had done the actual writing was cautious and insecure, while the person who dictated it was bold and confident, perhaps overconfident.

Leaving the other letters, Bay took the first to his laboratory. He wished to come to grips with the two persons involved as they began their plot to free a criminal.

Dake arrived at a quarter to six as Bay was wrapping up his day's work. "How'd it go?" he asked.

Bay waved him to a chair, cleared his desk, and sat down behind it. "Very well," he replied. "I've done preliminary work on all three letters and I've gone over the first one carefully. You are taking this guy seriously, I suppose."

"You bet we are. I'm trying to get the archbishop to call off the Christmas Eve mass if we haven't caught whoever is behind this by then. Unfortunately, the church politics involved is trickier than in city hall. At any rate, I plan to release the story to the press a few days before Christmas. Perez wants it kept quiet. He is worried about the threat but he thinks it's a bluff. I don't."

"I don't either."

"Are we up against a gang?"

"That's just possible but I don't think so. There may be just two of them. The plotter is in it for money. The one who writes the letters, probably a woman, is under the influence of the plotter."

"But there's been no demand for money."

"I know that, but I guarantee he's out to collect. He's probably to be paid by Naranja's organization, and paid plenty. Consider what would happen if the attack on St. Patrick's Cathedral were carried out. Thousands of people would be killed in the very heart of New York City. One of the city's most famous landmarks would be destroyed. And there would be panic in Manhattan.

"At that point the plotter would be in a perfect position to threaten again. It doesn't bear contemplating."

"I know that. Police and agents are swarming all over the city trying to find this gang. So far not a lead. I think you are our best bet."

"What do you think the reason was for the letters to be handwritten, not typed? Is it just bravado?"

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"No. It makes pretty good sense as long as we can't find the person who wrote the letters. If the letter had been typed or printed on a word processor, we would know the type of machine used, its age, and other little facts about it. We could quickly find out how many such machines were sold and to whom. That would narrow the field to several thousand people. We could deal with that."

"You said there were six persons who had opportunity to leave all three letters. When can I have samples of their handwriting?"

"Any time you want it. The archdiocese gave us samples weeks ago. Our experts are sure that none of them match the writing in the letters."

"I'd like those samples tonight. It's important."

"No problem. I'll have them sent to your house."

"And I'd like to meet with those six."

"I'll have to ask Cardinal Perez about that. They are all archdiocesan employees. The police have interviewed them. The FBI has done background checks on them. And we have had people shadowing them for two weeks."

"Why is the CIA in so deep?"

"Because we nabbed Naranja and we intend to use him as a lever to break up an organization which is in the process of subverting governments all over the Caribbean. They want to turn the whole area into a dictatorship, the base for a criminal and drug empire. They have a huge amount of money behind them. Naranja is head of the organization and its brains. We can beat them if we can hold on to him."

"I see. That confirms my suspicion that the person behind this is being paid handsomely."

"Is there anything else you need?"

"One more thing. Could you get me a sample of the cardinal's handwriting?"

Dake gave a long silent whistle. "I can," he replied, "but surely you don't suspect him?"

"He fits the profile of the mind behind the letters: bold, aggressive, imaginative, with ability to plan carefully and execute efficiently. Besides, he is the person who had the best opportunity to plant the letters. We don't dare exclude him."

"Okay, I'll get you his handwriting. I'll have to be careful, though. The archdiocese is becoming more touchy every day. Everyone under suspicion is in their employ and a third of them are priests. They'd like to ignore the whole thing but they don't want to lose the cathe-

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dral and several thousand people. They don't have that much insurance."

Six samples plus a letter written by Cardinal Perez arrived at nine that night. Bay spent two hours studying them and went to bed troubled.

The next day he completed his tests on the second letter. Then he read it not as a specimen of handwriting but as a communication:

"Diego Naranja has not yet been released. Your time runs short. Somewhere in this city we have set up a rocket aimed at St. Patrick's Cathedral. It is armed and ready to fire. We do not plan to discharge it before Christmas Eve but an accident might happen. You had better set Naranja free quickly. You are forewarned and we are forearmed.

"Ninety percent of the building will be destroyed if we are forced to go through with our plans. Everyone in the building will certainly die. We know that you can bring enough pressure on the president to free Naranja. Do so."

Dake arrived a little after ten. He had arranged to have Bay talk with the six who could have left the letters.

"After studying the letters you gave me, I think that for the present you can cancel my talk with three of them," Bay said. "We will concentrate on Father Jacques, Robert Hood, Angelo Blake, and Cardinal Perez. Since I have already talked with the cardinal, we can skip him. Tell me about the other three."

"Father Jacques is a brilliant young priest who has recently been appointed secretary to the archbishop. I wish he wasn't on your list. He's more conservative than the archbishop himself, aggressive, sarcastic, an extrovert fanatic."

"I take it you don't like him."

"I don't. The city police kowtow to him because he knows how to pressure politicians. He's been trying to run the hunt for the plotter. He could gum up everything."

"And the others?"

"Hood and Blake are laymen. Hood handles public relations for the church in this area. He has a lot of influence with the media, but he is a smooth operator, the fist of mail in a velvet glove. He cooperates with everyone and usually gets them to do what he wants them to.

"Blake is a fundraiser. The archdiocese would be headed for chapter eleven bankruptcy without him. He is friendly, outgoing, a work-

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aholic. We'll have a hard time finding a place in his schedule for you to talk with him."

"Then don't schedule a private talk. Instead, arrange for me to be present at one of his conferences with someone else. I just want to see him in action. By the way, I hope the archbishop has good auditors."

"The best. You think Blake may have had his hand in the till? Not a chance."

"It's just that his handwriting shows that he could be a wonderful con man. You wouldn't consider warning them?"

"No way, not even indirectly."

"Well, he sounds interesting. I'm looking forward to meeting him. I can't say the same for Father Jacques."

"And he is the first on your list. By the way, he is the only one of them who officially knows about the threat to St. Pat's."

"When can I see him?"

"You can see Jacques and Hood this afternoon. I'll have to see about Blake later."

When Dake left, Bay took up the third letter and read it thoughtfully:

"I'm sure you are not exercising your influence as you should. Don't be lazy. Would you rather have Naranja in prison and St. Patrick's destroyed, or Naranja free and St. Patrick's untouched? The results of your actions will touch the lives of many. Be prepared to live with your decisions.

"Naranja must be free and safely back in Barbados by Christmas Eve or New York City will suffer an irreparable loss. This is the last warning you will get. The rattlesnake gives plenty of warning; if it is ignored, the victim sounds a death rattle."

Not a nice thought, Bay mused. The plotter knew how to marshal his arguments to hit home. Bay compared the three letters. The first had spoken sententiously about international law. It had used words like "unlawful" and "illegal." All very high-sounding. The second letter had still spoken of what "we" would do, trying to maintain the notion that a gang was at work. But the third said, "I'm sure" and ended with a reference to a rattlesnake. No, it wasn't an organized gang. There was one man at work assisted by another person who did the writing. He picked up the handwriting samples Dake had given him. Surely it was one of these: Jacques, Hood, Blake, or Perez.

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* * *

After lunch he met with Father Jacques. The priest was large. He was tall and corpulent and his bearing made it seem that he filled the room. Talking with him was like talking with a rumbling volcano about to erupt.

"I hope you can persuade the police commissioner to put more men on this case," Jacques began. "All the drug dealers in the city can't do as much damage as this lunatic who is threatening to blow up St. Patrick's. He ought to have his men searching every building within sight of the cathedral."

Bay had not met the police commissioner, but he felt certain that Father Jacques had. He didn't try to explain his own lack of political clout. Trying to divert the archbishop's secretary was like trying to divert a tidal wave.

"If necessary," Jacques continued, "we ought to use soldiers. They aren't doing anything but drilling. Let's get them to work finding this maniac."

A vision flashed before Bay's mind of the infantry—supported no doubt by tanks, artillery, and helicopters—fighting its way through New York traffic. He took a deep breath to clear his head.

The priest, however, needed no pause for breath. He continued irresistibly until the telephone interrupted him. The archbishop required his presence. He excused himself, threw his shoulders back, and marched out of the room, leaving it seeming empty. Bay mopped his forehead.

Dake had promised that Hood would see him immediately after Jacques. Bay was to talk with Hood about a perfectly legitimate proposal to have Fordham alumni tour archdiocesan headquarters during a reunion in March.

Hood was less imposing than Cardinal Perez or Father Jacques. When he introduced himself as Robert Hood, Bay responded, "Not a relative of the archer in Sherwood Forest, by any chance?"

Hood laughed. "No, but I am descended from the English poet Thomas Hood."

"The one Rosetti called the finest English poet between Shelley and Tennyson?"

"Yes, but also the one who caused Poe to say that whoever claimed to enjoy such chapters of puns as Hood daily committed to paper should not be credited upon oath. I'm afraid I've inherited my ancestor's penchant for puns, though not in such excess."

"If it's a fault, it is one which Shakespeare shared."

"And the Bible, as I keep reminding my employers."

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They quickly made arrangements for the alumni tour and Hood departed with the comment that he hoped the alumni visit would not prove to be a tour de farce.

That left Blake. No appointment had been set up with him. Bay returned to his office and brought his analysis of the letters up to date while he waited.

Dake called late that afternoon. Blake was addressing a Knights of Columbus meeting that evening. Bay could attend as a guest of one of the members. It wasn't as good as a personal interview, but it would have to do.

Blake was a middle-aged man, tall and slightly stooped. He peered through thick glasses and beamed as gleefully as an oversized elf. His personality was electric. After hearing him for ten minutes, Bay felt like standing up and cheering.

Blake had done his homework, too. He knew all the officers of the organization, their foibles, their strengths, and their reputations. He spent a quarter of an hour getting laughs at their expense. By the time he got around to the subject of money, no one in the room would have held out the week's rent. He knew it, too.

Bay thoroughly enjoyed the evening but he was eager to get home. It was after dark when he did.

Dake had said to call if he reached any conclusions. Bay called. He gave a name to the agent and paused.

"Are you sure?" the agent asked.

"Positive. You can take your agents off the other three and concentrate on that one."

"Okay. We'll send men around to every building in Manhattan if we have to and show his picture to managers and janitors. He probably rented the place in October. It's a big task, but not an impossible one. We'll also do an even more intense check on his personal life. You think the person who wrote the letters was a woman?"

"I can't be sure of it, but it's most likely. I guarantee the description of personality: a person whose ambition exceeds her ability, who loses herself in details, who is secretive and cautious, but weak."

"Thanks, I'll let you know what we uncover."

Four days passed. Then Bay received a call from Dake. "You were right all the way. We've located the building. It's within walking distance if you want to be in on the operation." He gave the address.

Bay walked over and found Dake waiting in the lobby. They took the elevator nearly to the top. "There's no one in the room," Dake

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said, "but a woman usually comes there for a couple of hours each day according to the maintenance people. She should show up in half an hour or so. I'll show you the set up."

They entered a room which was bare except for a grimly menacing weapon set up by the window.

"We have disarmed it," Dake assured him. "But look through the sights."

Bay did and shivered. "That's the cathedral, all right," he said.

They left the room and waited in a small suite which had been set up as field headquarters. Twenty minutes later a beeper sounded and Dake's agent reported that the woman was on her way up.

They watched as she came out of the elevator and went to the door of the room where the rocket had been erected.

When she entered the room, she was quickly joined by two of Dake's agents. Dake and Bay followed. The woman seemed about to faint. She recovered and made a dash for the rocket device. No one stopped her.

On finding that it had been rendered harmless, she broke down. She told them all they wanted to know. Dake called the police and told them to arrest the plotter.

That afternoon Dake and Bay visited the spacious offices of Cardinal Perez. Without cape and biretta he looked only slightly less imposing. He had a manner of standing perfectly still which produced the effect of looming over everything and everyone.

He spoke to Bay. "I realize that you can do wonders at analyzing handwriting, but the letters were written by the woman. How did you know who dictated them?"

"The content told me that. Hood had inherited or acquired an inveterate habit of punning. He even spoke about it to me. It was second nature to him. Read the three letters and you can almost hear his voice in them, from the play on the word 'secure' in the first letter to the play on 'rattle' in the last."

Perez smote himself on the forehead. It was the nearest he had come to humility in Bay's presence. "Of course, of course," the cardinal almost shouted, "I remember being struck by the use of the phrase 'mass murder' at one point. I should have known then who wrote the letters."

He turned to Dake and asked, "What will you do with him?"

"Actually, he will get off fairly light. He has agreed to cooperate with us completely. It's Naranja and his organization we are after.

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Hood has given us eight names of people in New York who work for them. We are well on our way toward breaking up the whole conspiracy.

"By the way, Hood asked me to tell both of you that from now on he intends to obey the law to the very letter."

Perez shook his head sadly.

DETECTIVERSE

HAZARDOUS TO THE HEALTH

by ANITA J. FRANKE

Frank McGinty smoked like a stack,
Constantly opening up a new pack.
Mrs. McGinty hoped for the day
When he'd throw them all away.
But when he retired, things got worse
And conversation became quite terse.
She begged and pleaded for him to quit,
But Frank relented not a bit.
The house was smoky and smelly, too—
The walls had turned a brownish hue.
The curtains were dingy, not easy to bear,
And cigarette burns were everywhere.
Then Mrs. McGinty developed a cough,
But Frank refused to "knock it off."
Desperate times call for drastic doings,
And Mrs. M. felt her life was in ruins:
Maybe McGinty needed a scare—
Something that really would raise his hair.
She thought of cigars that loudly explode
And wondered what they used for load.
Then she remembered downstairs there'd been
A tin of gunpowder Frank kept in a bin.
Instead of packing it into a shell,
She thought a butt would do as well.
That night when Frank flicked open his Bic,
She'd make darn sure she was out of there quick!

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Jo Bannister's nine mystery novels for the Doubleday Crime Club will be known to many EQMM *readers. A newspaper editor by trade, she has won several awards for journalism in Northern Ireland (where she currently lives), and is a recipient of a bronze medal from the Royal Society of Arts. Her new novel is expected out soon under the Doubleday* Perfect Crime *imprint, and we will have several more of her stories later this year to follow this first memorable outing . . .*

THE WITNESS

by JO BANNISTER

All the time he was growing up, Joe had two dreams: two ambitions, two images in his mind of what he would do when he was big and strong and rich and independent. The first thing he would do would be wrest from his aunt the thin Malacca cane she used and beat her black and blue with it; and the second thing he would do would be spit-roast that bird of hers.

His aunt was a violent woman, and that cane was her preferred weapon. Joe doubted if there had been a week in the nine years he spent in her household when he had not carried the marks of it discernable somewhere on his body, new welts striping him red and white and occasionally bloody where the raised joints tore the skin, fading bruises if he had managed to avoid arousing her ire for ten days or more.

Because they lived in a small town with small town ways, no one interfered. Miss Myra Morris was a respected woman in the community, only partly because she was also a wealthy one. She owned a boot and shoe factory and gave work to half the men in the district. She was a pillar of the church. She made annual contributions to local charities and was a generous benefactor of the school.

Besides which, she had taken in her brother's son to raise, though all the town knew the depth of antipathy that lay between Myra and her late sister-in-law. When the young Mrs. Morris died, Myra

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would not attend the funeral, could not bring herself even to express regret. When her brother Matthew died, some said of drink, two years later, she buried him in the family plot rather than with his wife, sold their house to pay their debts, and struck from the sign over the factory gate—"M & M Morris, Boots & Shoes"—one of the initial *M*s and the ampersand.

But she had also taken in their boy Joe, which the small community had considered the right thing to do. She did not have to: the seven-year-old had inherited nothing beyond his father's name and his mother's frail good looks. Myra had long since bought out her brother's interest in their father's firm, so young Joe was in no sense her partner. She took him in because the alternative was the orphanage she so generously supported.

So there was a certain amount of tolerance for Myra's bad temper in the town. She had always been known as a strong woman, a determined woman, a woman who brooked no nonsense. It was hardly surprising if a woman of her age—she was Matthew's elder sister—suddenly presented with a boy-child the spitting image of her detested sister-in-law occasionally gave her temper free rein.

Besides, it was in the nature of boys to be beaten. It rarely did them any harm. So the first time Joe turned up for school with his cheek split open under one eye, it was assumed that he must have trespassed on his aunt's benevolence and had got no more than he deserved. And when in changing for games he revealed a skinny little body beaten to the shades of a rainbow, the general feeling in the common room was that the child should be watched for signs of the personality defects that the respected Miss Morris had noticed and was already dealing with.

Joe had never been the angel that his delicate mother believed, but neither was he a devil in boy's clothing. He did his best to stay on the right side of his irascible aunt, to start with because he wanted to please her but soon because he was deeply afraid of her, but somehow he kept slipping up.

He put the wrong clothes on. Either he was wearing out his good clothes doing dirty jobs, or he was showing her up by looking like an urchin. The Malacca cane swung and stung. He ate too much—like a peasant—or too little, mocking her efforts. The cane swished. He was under her feet, or never there when she wanted him; he had a navvy's love of soap and water, or his mother's fancy ideas and work-shy ways; his school work was not good enough, or he buried his nose in his books to avoid doing his chores around the house.

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Every time he displeased her, she hit him; sometimes a casual flick, sometimes a protracted attack that she rolled her sleeves up for. Even then he could not satisfy her. If he bit his lip and made no sound, she called it dumb insolence; if he cried out, she accused him of upsetting her bird and flew into a rage.

In time he learned that how she was was not a reflection of how he was. There was no way for him to avoid her anger. She hated and despised him, and looked for reasons to beat him. Knowing that took some of the pressure off him. The hurt was easier to bear when he realised it was not his own fault. He no longer walked round her on tiptoe but did what he thought he should do, and put up with the beatings as he put up with the occasional bout of toothache or influenza, as something unpleasant but impersonal and probably inevitable.

He spent his time studying mathematics, which was his entry to a whole world from which his aunt was excluded, enjoying fantasies in which he murdered her in a succession of imaginative ways, and trying to poison her bird.

It was a horrible thing, black as a crow, and its preferred perch was always the back of whatever chair Aunt Myra was sitting in. When it spread its wings it hooded her head like a black halo. It had a beak like a spear, and murderous eyes.

Though its nominal home was a big Victorian cage in the sitting room, most of the time the door was left open and the bird had the run of the house. This was not an altogether sanitary arrangement, but Myra, who could put the fear of God into young Joe over the print of a plimsole on the kitchen linoleum, never raised her voice to the bird. In fact, she rarely addressed it at all. He lived in the same house as it for nine years and never heard her call it by name.

Joe hated the bird rather as he supposed Myra hated him. It was not only the occasional fierce peck it gave him, not only its mad and violent eyes, not even the fact that Myra treated it like a nephew and him like a crow. He hated it because it spied on him. It spied on him in the kitchen where he hurried his breakfast in order to be finished before she came for hers. It spied on him when he sought to escape her in the garden, which was long and overgrown with shrubs. Even in his bedroom, which was the closest thing he had to a sanctuary from her, it fluttered up to the window and sat on the sill spying on him through the glass.

He wondered if it took tales back to her of what he was doing. He asked her if it could talk. She stared at him, despising him, and

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suggested it was rather large and not the right color for a budgerigar. He was unconvinced. A spy who could not tell what he saw seemed to Joe to be of limited value.

He tested the hypothesis by trying to teach the bird a few words. He worked on this only when his aunt was not present, but inevitably she surprised him one day, ghosting up behind him in her long dark clothes like widow's weeds. When she heard what he was trying to teach the bird to say, she took the cane to him and only stopped when he fell on the floor barely sensible. The bird watched and never said a word.

So he tried to poison it. He impregnated its cuttlebone with warfarin. It sharpened its beak on the furniture instead. He stole chemicals from school and devised various cocktails to sprinkle on its millet. It threw the seed all round the room in a terrible temper until it was replaced. He offered it green stuff from the garden laced with Paraquat. It ignored his present and tried to peck his eye out.

Aunt Myra may have suspected what he was doing. In any event, she remarked casually one day that when the bird died she would cook it for his dinner. So he gave up on poison and spent a happy summer trying to catch its head accidentally in a door.

He made his first serious attempt to run away at the age of thirteen. He slept in barns, and once under a hedgerow, and ate what he could find or steal, and had never felt better in his life. It lasted for ten days: then he was caught stealing milk and handed over to the police, and they returned him to his aunt. She beat him so badly that she could not send him back to school for another week, and even then she put about the word that he had been selling himself and a man had almost crippled him. The bird watched while he dragged his battered body around the house, and he could have sworn it was leering.

Two years later he was ready to try again. This time he knew where the problems would come. He had saved—all right, stolen—enough money to tide him over for a week or two, and by then he hoped to have found a job: he was just about old enough to ask for work without exciting too much curiosity. In the absence of a passing circus he got a job as a helper on a lorry, and passed out of the small town and the ambit of his aunt's authority at a steady fifty-five miles an hour while his heart soared.

Finally, life smiled on Joe Morris. After eighteen months helping on the lorries, his talent with figures was recognized by one of the partners in the haulage firm and he was offered a clerk's job in the

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office. By the time he was twenty-two he was assistant to the company secretary; at twenty-five he was office manager; at twenty-eight he had his own flat, his own car, a small financial stake in the company which entitled him to be described as a junior partner, and a fiancé who was the niece of one of the senior partners. The future seemed prepared to make up to Joe for all the wrongs the past had done him.

Then fate took a hand again. He was driving up the motorway to a conference on the subject "Materials handling in the 1990s," when a badly loaded road-freighter spread its cargo across all three lanes and the hard shoulder ten miles ahead of him. The police quickly set up a detour between junctions, and Joe found himself driving along roads he remembered through the outskirts of the small town where he had grown up. In all the years he had been using this motorway he had never realised how close he was to the place he had once, however ruefully, called home.

He thought about the vicious old woman who had fed him. He had permanent marks on his body that she had given him. He thought about her mad-eyed bird. After thirteen years there was every likelihood that one or the other of them, hopefully even both, was dead. She would not have left him the boot factory if she had died. She would have left it to the bird first.

It did not matter to him whether she was alive or dead. She was the painful past that he had managed, by his own efforts, to leave behind. He had never so much as sent her a postcard, though he had been tempted when he took his first foreign holiday. She was nothing to him now. Yet he found himself leaving the indicated detour and driving down the old familiar roads that he knew led to the big dark house with its overgrown garden.

It was morbid fascination. The intervening years had half persuaded him that Myra Morris could not have been the harridan he remembered, that a boy's fertile imagination must have played some part in his lurid recollection of her. And yet in his heart he knew that he had exaggerated nothing. She had made his life a misery for nine years, and only a supremely evil woman could have done that.

He thought that driving past the house might enable him to lay her ghost. If the house had been recently painted in bright colors, and there were roses and bedding-plants and maybe a child's swing in the garden, and instead of a viperous black bird a fat little dog rushed out to challenge him on behalf of its happy family, he would

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know that she was gone and not even a shadow of her remained. That would be worth the extra ten minutes that it would add to his journey. It would not even make him late for the conference.

On the corner of the quiet street he slowed down, looking for the house. His first thought was that it was gone entirely. Then he realised that the untended shrubs had turned finally into a jungle which had swallowed it up. He stopped his car at the kerb and stared in at the gateway, and all he could see was a curtain of greenery and a chimney. No roses, no swing, no dog.

So no happy family: no sunny children, no doting parents. Either the old bat lived there still, or she had died and the place was empty.

It did not matter to him which. He tried to drive away. Somehow he could not.

He looked again at his watch. He had made excellent time up to now; as long as he was away within half an hour he would arrive at the conference at the appointed time. Feeling quite strongly that he would regret this, he turned the car in at the gate. The curve of the drive through the crowding shrubbery quickly shut him off from the road.

When he got out and stood at the front door he still could not be sure if the house was empty or lived in. There were no conclusive signs, like milk bottles or a newspaper in the letter box. The old paint flaked and peeled from the woodwork; old curtains hung like cobwebs at the windows; an old coconut doormat had been turned upside down so that the word "Welcome" did not show.

Joe tried the door but it was locked. He rang the bell—or pressed the button, he could not be sure it rang—and rapped with the cast-iron knocker, but no one came. He ducked under a rampant rhododendron and walked round to the back of the house.

And then he saw her. For an awesome moment he thought she was dead and rotting in the armchair inside the French window. He held his breath and watched, and she did not move, and he thought: She is, she's finally dead, and even dead she's waiting for me! And he felt a little joyful, and a little sick.

Then she moved. Perhaps he threw a shadow on the glass that caught the corner of her eye; perhaps he made some murmur of shock that her old ears, used to the silence of an empty house, picked up; or perhaps the bird told her. Because it was there too, perched on the back of her chair, its spread wings hooding her old head like a black halo.

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She turned and looked at him through the glass. He had thought that, after so long, she might not recognize him, but her eyes were full of hatred and triumph. She had neither forgotten nor forgiven.

In a way she looked hardly more decrepit than he remembered her. She wore the same long black clothes, scraped her hair—still black, by nature or design—up in the same severe bun. Her face might have been whiter and more wrinkled, the blazing blue eyes a little faded, the strength of her tall frame a little less. But he had hoped to find her dead, and she was still demonstrably alive and uncontested queen in her crumbling palace.

Joe staggered back a step, struck by the malignancy of her look as if it were a blow, and would have turned and left that dreadful place at a run, except for one thing. She raised her hand and beckoned to him.

The French window was unlocked. He opened it, stood undecided on the threshold.

"Come in, come in," she croaked impatiently at him. Her voice was definitely weaker than he remembered, though no more attractive. Perhaps some nasty disease of the larynx, he wondered hopefully. "You came, then."

He stared. He did not understand. "You were expecting me?"

"I knew you'd be back. Once the money you stole from me ran out, I knew you'd be back for more. I told the police, you know. Being my nephew gave you no right to my money, and I told them you'd stolen it. I hoped they'd find you and put you in prison, but I suppose I'd have heard if they had."

Joe shook his head slowly. "No, they didn't. I don't want your money; I've made my own."

Her violent eyes were scanning him up and down, up and down, taking in the good suit tailored to his slight frame, the tan left over from his last holiday. "Look at you," she jeered, "all done up like a dog's dinner. You're that tart of a mother of yours all over again."

It was too long ago and he had come too far to be hurt by her again. "You pathetic old harpy," he said, and turned away.

"Don't you turn your back on me!" she cried. She snatched a book from the table beside her and hurled it at him. It missed and broke a pane in the French window instead, but it certainly got his attention. He stared at her. Memory had exaggerated nothing. He was a grown man, twenty-eight years old, a successful businessman about to start a family of his own, and she was still trying to bully him.

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Of course, she must have missed him. She probably had not hit anyone for thirteen years.

He found a voice, and took a moment to be pleased that he sounded calmer than he felt. "Myra, I haven't come here to fight with you. I was in the area, I wondered if you were still here. I'll go now and I won't come back. I've more things in my life to think about than you and that damn bird."

Her shrill voice dropped a note. "Are you married, then?" She said it as if insinuating something indecent.

"Soon," he said. "I'd send you an invitation, but you might come."

"Another painted slut like your mother?"

Joe thought back. It had not struck him before, but there was something alike about them, gentle Louise and his fragrant mother. It was a comforting thought, that he had spent most of his life looking for her and had not been unduly influenced in his wooing by her relationship to his senior partner. He smiled. "Yes."

Myra rose to her feet, awkwardly, leaning on the Malacca cane. Venom dripped from her tongue. "I'll find you," she said. "Wherever you go when you leave here, I'll find you. I'll dance at your wedding, all right—if there is a wedding after I've had my say. You're a thief, Joe Morris, a thief, and the son of a wastrel and a whore. Will she still marry you when she knows that?"

Joe thought for another moment. "Yes."

"And when I tell her that you go with men?"

He flushed. "That isn't true."

She laughed in his face. "There are people in this town who'll swear that the police brought you back here barely able to stand after what one of them did to you, that you had to be kept off school because of it. You were only thirteen."

"You know that isn't true."

"It's not what's true that counts, it's what she believes. I lost you once, Joe Morris, I'm not going to lose you again. If you leave me to go to her, that's what I'll tell her."

"But—*why?*" Truly Joe did not understand. "You hated me from the day you set eyes on me. I thought you'd be glad never to see me again."

"People don't walk out on me, Joe Morris. I may throw them out, but they don't walk!"

"No?" He straightened up. He still was not as tall as she was. "Watch me."

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That was when the bird flew at him. Until then, only the insolent blink of its bald eyelids showed it was a live thing and not a stuffed bird fixed to the back of her chair. Now with a soft clap of air through its feathers it launched itself over his aunt's shoulder and swooped on him. Just as it had all those years ago, it went for his eye.

In shock and horror he flung his arm up at it, and felt his hand connect with its soft plumed body. It reeled away from him drunkenly and flapped up out of his reach to perch on an arm of the chandelier. Its mad eyes glared at him and its beak opened in an indignant pant.

Joe felt his own blood cool on his cheek. The bird's talons had laid him open again, precisely where his aunt's cane had cut him twenty years before. An inch higher and it would have blinded him. He touched his fingers to the wetness and stared at them. The old woman began to laugh.

In a sudden access of fury he snatched cushions off the settee, filling the air with the dust of years, and hurled them at the panting bird. The first dislodged it from the chandelier and it flapped heavily to the picture rail. A second cushion knocked it from there and it tumbled in midair before recovering and, squawking with rage and fear, shot towards the French window.

Joe waited for it. One good bat as it passed him and he could knock it out of the sky forever and trample its nasty little carcass to a ball of fluff and broken feathers. Twenty years of hatred welled up in him, and for a moment his eyes gleamed as mad as the bird's. He would stamp it out of his life and out of his memory, and leave here and never give the place or his vile old aunt another thought. He would be rid of them for good. The bird shot towards the opening and Joe waited with his cushion and his narrow face full of anticipation.

The old woman was stiff with years of sitting in this room, but she was a long way from being helpless. She screamed at him, and as she screamed she lunged, and as she lunged she lashed at him with the long thin cane.

Its tip whipped across his face, opening the cheek that the bird had left alone. Shock made him drop the cushion and stagger back. The bird escaped, shooting for the trees. Joe stared at the old woman and could not believe that she was beating him again.

But she was. She mistook the stunned way he froze there for the childish acceptance, and raised the cane again and lashed at his face

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once more. "And will she still marry you with your pretty face in ruins?" Her voice soared triumphantly.

Before she could strike him a third time, his hand caught the swinging cane and wrenched it from her. For a moment neither of them knew what he was going to do. Then Joe knew exactly what he was going to do. He hit her with it. She screamed. He hit her again, and again, and again, and her cries were a repayment on the years of humiliation.

After she fell to the floor, the black clothes spreading like an oil stain, he paused long enough to mop his brow and roll his sleeves up. Then he hit her some more.

She died of malice. The postmortem would ascribe her death to heart failure induced by shock, but actually she gave up her life willingly in the knowledge that it would wreck his.

When Joe realised she was dead, he tried to worry about what this would mean to him but found he could not. He was rid of the black dog that had haunted him for most of his life. His heart was light. The aching of his biceps was a benediction.

He thought he would go to the police and report what he had done without waiting to be tracked down. Though he felt no sense of guilt, he realised that he would go to prison. He was sorry about that, for himself and for Louise, but not enough to wish the old harridan alive again.

Then he wondered if it was necessary to confess. The street had been quiet when he arrived and his car could not have been seen standing in the drive. If someone saw him leaving, they would think nothing of it until the body was found, and that could be days or weeks. There was nothing particularly distinctive about his car anyway. And he doubted if the neighbors would even think of the nephew who ran away thirteen years before, not his face and not his name.

He thought it through carefully. He wiped the blood off her cane, because some of it was his, and wiped all the surfaces he might have touched. No one would have heard her screams—the room was at the back of the big house, surrounded by jungle, and her voice had started frail and grown frailer. Besides, anyone hearing her would have been here by now.

He would leave the house quietly and drive away, and return to the motor way and reach the conference centre in time to give his address on "Materials handling in the 1990s." In all likelihood, no one would ever connect the death of a mad old woman at the hands

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of an intruder with the boy who had run away from her thirteen years before. If they did think of him they would have to find him. And if they found him and asked what he was doing today, he would refer them to the hundred-odd people at the conference. He had left his office on time and arrived at the conference centre on time, and so far as anyone need know he had not been within ten miles of this house.

It would be impossible for him to prove that he could not have murdered his aunt, but almost as difficult for the police to show that he could have done. Without witnesses, they could prove nothing. In this quiet street where no one had noticed how she had used him, was it so much to hope that no one would see the car leaving?

He would have to explain the marks on his face, if only for Louise's benefit. He would—yes, he would engineer a small accident as he arrived at the conference centre, tripping as he climbed out of his car and falling among the papers he was carrying. The reinforced edges of his concertina file could easily cause long straight marks like that, and none of the people hastening to help him up—because he would not do it until plenty of people were watching—would ask themselves why the marks already looked half an hour old. He could be unlucky, but he thought he had every chance of getting away with it.

And that is what he did. He tidied up the scene of the crime. He drove quietly away and did not see anyone watching. He drove to the conference centre, and as he climbed out of his car took a terrible tumble, inflicting three deep scratches on his face with the equipment he carried. But colleagues plied him with whisky and cleaned him up and reordered his papers, and he gave his lecture on time, and if he seemed very slightly shaky after his upset, no one thought anything of it.

In the evening he drove home and waited, for the telephone to ring, for the door to be rapped. When neither had happened by midnight he went to bed and fell into a curiously peaceful and dreamless sleep.

His partners exclaimed over his injuries the next day, and Louise in a more tender way that evening. No one called, no one rang.

At the end of the week he sprang a surprise holiday on Louise, and they went to the coast for a week and ate fish and chips and candyfloss, and drove around with the car windows open, and the sun helped to hide his bruises and heal his scars. When he returned to his flat, no one had been looking for him. He asked, casually, at

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the office on the Monday morning but no one had called there either.

Midway through the week after that—the third week—he answered a knock at his door without even a flutter of anxiety, and there were two large policemen on his doormat.

His stomach churned inside him but he invited them in politely enough and asked how he could help them.

"Are you Joe Morris? Formerly of—" and they read out his aunt's address. He nodded without speaking. "We have to tell you, Mr. Morris, that your aunt has been murdered, and we have a witness who puts you at the scene."

As straightforward and simple as that. No beating round the bush. No "Where were you on the afternoon of —?" No "Can anyone vouch for your movements?" The little pantomime at the conference centre had been entirely wasted. They had a witness.

They had a witness who not only saw him at his aunt's house but also remembered him. All they had to do, once the body was found and the witness interviewed, was locate him. It had taken a little time, but he had made no particular effort to cover his trail. When he was making his new life for himself he had never expected to have to hide from the police.

He thought about denying everything and waiting for them to prove it. But then they would line him up with seven other slightly-built young men with marks (actual or pencilled) on their cheeks, and their witness would touch him on the shoulder and that would be that. There was more dignity in confession. So he told them what had happened—everything that had happened, from when he was six years old.

When he had finished, and they had completed their notes and leaned back in their chairs, their eyes at once disapproving and compassionate, he said, "Who saw me? I didn't see anyone."

"Our witness?" said one of the policemen, as if Joe could have meant anything else.

"Yes. Who was it? A neighbor? A tradesman? I thought I'd got away with it. Who recognized me?"

The other policeman said, "Your aunt's companion."

Joe frowned in disbelief. "What companion? No one would live with my aunt, not from choice. There was no one in that house but her and me."

"And the witness." The first policeman nodded to the second, and the second went to the front door and came back a moment later carrying a large cage. In the cage was the bird.

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"My aunt's familiar spirit." Joe forced a laugh. "But I don't understand. How could you know from a bird that it was me, not an intruder, that sent her to that great belfry in the sky?"

"It's an Indian Hill mynah," said the second policeman, who had clearly looked it up. He leaned down to look the black bird in its mad eye—Joe noticed that he kept his face out of beak range—and said a very strange thing to it. He said, "No-o-o-o-o."

The bird looked at him as if he was insane. So did Joe.

The policeman, looking a trifle embarrassed, tried again. "No-o-o-o-o."

The mynah looked at the policeman. Then it looked at Joe.

Then its fusty feathers seemed to expand as it drew a deep breath and shrieked out, with all the volume at its disposal, the last words it had heard its mistress speak. She had echoed them time and time again, and finally it had got the hang of talking.

Joe turned cold. It was not only his aunt's words, it was his aunt's voice, mimicked to a deeply disturbing accuracy. Out of the bird's beak she shrieked at him, accusing, condemning, mocking him:

"No, Joe, no, Joe, no, Joe, no, Joe, no!"

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Phyllis Diller returns with another wonderfully zany concoction . . .

I HATE AARON CANE

by PHYLLIS DILLER

Naturally, Roland Carberry was the prime suspect. Yes, he told Lieutenant Sinden, the policeman in charge of the case, he had detested Aaron Cane. "Aaron was born rotten. I hope he died rotten, too."

"He died suddenly, I'll concede that," Sinden said. "Did you hate him enough to kill him?"

"Of course. Do you know that last month he killed some of my pigeons? He put out poisoned corn feed, I lost the most beautiful bantam Malaysian. The police threw me out when I tried to file a complaint."

"Did you kill Aaron Cane?"

"Of course not."

"You didn't just happen to drive by his house and toss a bomb through an open window?"

"Are you asking because somebody told you I collect stuff from World War Two and have a lot of grenades?"

"A neighbor did mention that."

"Did anybody mention that I raise prize roses? And cactus? Or that I have baseball cards going back to 1910? They'd love to nail me to the wall, the neighbors. Most of the town is on Aaron's side. The son of a congressman, a lawyer. We Carberrys are drunks. Idiots, that's what we are. They forget that I've been working here at the mill for twenty-two years. Never missed one day. Never had a fight with my Elsie, may she rest in peace. Ask the neighbors about how Aaron tried to steal her away. We were engaged. He put on a show—fancy new car, Italian suits; he even used to go to the beauty parlor for his hair. The lies he told her about me!"

"The explosion occurred about nine-fifteen. Do you remember where you were at nine-fifteen?"

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"I come to work at eight. The ponds have to be hot enough for the wood pulp to cook. Otherwise, we'd have two hundred men standing around not making paper."

"Did anybody see you this morning?"

"Mr. Eagleton, the boss. Joe Vortek, he's the crew foreman. The kid with the food van. The whole world saw me."

"At nine-fifteen?"

"I was here." He beamed. "You think I did it! Maybe I used a timer, did that cross your mind?"

"Yes, it did. There were no signs of a timer. The pattern indicates that an explosive device did the job on impact."

"Okay, now that I'm no longer going to the gas chamber, could we give Mr. Eagleton back his office?"

"We might as well. Oh, could you write down the names of the people who saw you this morning? Then you can go back to work."

Roland took the proffered pad and pen. "I'm on lunch now."

"Enjoy it," Sinden said. "Thank you for cooperating."

"When you came in and told me Aaron was dead, that was thanks enough. We were six years old, he stole candy in the drugstore and put the empty wrappers in my locker. My father almost beat the skin off my back."

Roland Carberry smiled pleasantly at Sinden, picked up the lunch box from where he'd deposited it on his arrival into the office, and walked out. He whistled as he walked toward the stone benches and tables provided by the company for lunching or snacking. Sitting down, he ran his fingers over the decal on the front of the box, a scene of pines and a small brook.

He opened the lunch box and debated whether to eat the hard-boiled egg first or the tuna-salad sandwich. He opted for the sandwich. Before he picked it up, he flicked off a small white feather. For another brief moment, he studied the tiny spare clip he'd brought along that morning. He hadn't needed it. The first clip had done a very nice job of holding the tiny Bulgarian grenade firmly until the bird's body heat had sprung it while circling Aaron's roof. It was amazing what a pigeon could be taught to do. Especially Oscar, his favorite fantail. Sitting in his open wire coop at the house, did Oscar know how well he'd done? Roland would reward him with raisin bran. Oscar loved raisin bran. Roland also wondered if Aaron had seen the grenade drop relentlessly down the chimney. ●

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Another newcomer to EQMM, *Steven Utley has been writing short stories for almost twenty years. His work has appeared in a variety of publications, including* Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine. *Mr. Utley lives in Austin, Texas where he works as a research associate for the Texas State Legislature. In "The Dinosaur Season," he revisits an old conflict between science and religion . . .*

THE DINOSAUR SEASON

by STEVEN UTLEY

Angstrom awoke feeling as ancient and dried up as the Mesozoic Era itself. He was of good Scandinavian stock, but more than a quarter-century's worth of dinosaur seasons spent under broiling suns had turned his fair skin the color of old brick. This morning, he felt the weight of every second of those seasons, and he thought worriedly, Am I coming down with whatever Terry's got? Not *now*, please.

He listened to the soft, moist snores emanating from the lump on the other bed. You aren't getting sick, Ang, he told himself, you're just not getting enough sleep. He could not remember having spent a worse night in a motel. Terry's trips from bed to bathroom and back had kept him teetering on the edge of consciousness deep into the small hours of the night. Angstrom swung his bare legs over the side of the bed, stretched his arms high over his head, yawned. He felt brittle with fatigue.

He had just made up his mind not to wake Terry when the snoring lump gave a grunt and a heave and resolved itself into a bleary-eyed young man.

"Time to get up," Terry said in a thick voice.

"For me it is. You stay in bed." Angstrom leaned over him and lightly touched his forehead. It was hot against his fingertips. "No way I'm letting you spend the day in the sun. Go back to sleep."

"Brian needs me."

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"Go back to sleep."

"Znot fair," Terry murmured, but he let his head sink back into his pillow and almost immediately began to snore again.

Angstrom took a quick shower and dressed for a hard day in the field. Old shirt, old pants, old shoes, he thought as he studied himself in the mirror. Old man. He stepped out of the room into the open-air sauna of a Central Texas summer's day. It was only eight o'clock in the morning, but the air was already hot and heavy with humidity. Welcome to the Lone Star Steambath.

The motel sat at the edge of town, looking forlorn and excluded. The town itself looked as if it had been half-asleep since the end of World War II. A University of Texas van sat in the motel parking lot, and as Angstrom entered the coffee shop he saw a waitress setting breakfast before George and Sally at a table by the big front window. There was no one else in the place. He sat down next to Sally and said, "Just get in?"

George shrugged and speared a sausage on his plate. "Just long enough ago to order breakfast. We finished setting up the horse exhibit real late last night, grabbed an hour or two's sleep, left Austin just as rosy-fingered dawn was pushing back the night."

Sally spread jam on a biscuit half and said, "Carol Harkavy *wasn't* happy about having to hang around so late."

"Just so long as she's happy with the exhibit." Angstrom ordered breakfast for himself, then sat back in his chair and smothered a yawn. "The dinosaur season's off to a seriously lousy start this year. Terry's down with a stomach virus or something."

"Bet Brian's happy about that," said George. "They out at the trackway?"

"Brian is. Terry's here."

"How bad is he?"

"Bad enough. I want him to stay here today. If he's not better by tonight, I'm sending him home."

George's egg-laden fork paused halfway between his plate and his face. "How?"

Angstrom jerked a thumb at the van outside. "We can draw straws for the privilege."

"Well, I was hoping against hope." George gestured at Sally and himself with his fork, and the glob of egg slid off the tines and landed wetly beside his plate. "By *we*," he said to her, "he means *us*."

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Sally made a small, plaintive sound. "I can't wait," she said, "until I, too, am a full-fledged scientist and don't get so many privileges."

Angstrom gave her a pitying smile as he stirred creamer into his coffee. "You won't lose but a few hours if you turn around and come straight back. And being full-fledged wouldn't make any difference in this case. Brian gets excited when he's got dino tracks in front of him. Couldn't haul him away with a team of oxen."

"Brian," George said around a mouthful of toast, "is basically excitable. Find anything interesting in Blanco County?"

Angstrom shook his head. "Some mosasaur teeth, and that's *all* we have to show for the time we spent there. This year the floods've covered up more of Blanco than they uncovered. Anyway, Brian was hot to get to the trackway. He went on out to the ranch, and I put Terry to bed."

"Brian can have his tracks," said George. "I want bones. I want my own dinosaur."

"Somewhere," Sally told him, "there must be one with your name on it."

"Well," Angstrom said, "we'll go on down to Big Bend day after tomorrow or the next day. Meanwhile, drink your water. Put some more salt on those eggs. It's going to be a hot, hot day, and with Terry laid up, Brian'll need your help."

George said, "Thrill," and drained his water glass. "When I was a kid, Mom and Dad always used to tell me to study hard in school, or I'd be a ditch-digger all my life. So I studied real, real hard and grew up and decided to become a paleontologist. *Since* I became one, I figure I've moved about as much rock with my bare hands as there is in all of Brewster County, and sweated out enough salt to build my own life-sized model of Spindletop."

They ate in silence for a time. Then George pushed his plate away, leaned back in his chair, and folded his hands across his middle.

"We had a visitor at the lab day before yesterday," he said to Angstrom. "About half an hour after you three left, who should show up but our old buddy Polson."

Angstrom groaned. "Did he get *in?*"

"Walked right in."

Angstrom swore. "We've got some serious security problems at the lab."

"Sally and I were both in the back, crating horses." George grinned. "He had a nice, long talk with Sally. *At* Sally, rather."

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She looked sheepish. "Well, I didn't know who he was. I'm the new-hire, remember? George took one look at him and bolted."

It was George's turn to look sheepish. "Panicked. Sorry."

"You *didn't* let him near the specimens, I hope," Angstrom said. "You didn't let him see your maps."

"Well, he may have seen the maps," George said. "We had them spread all over the table in the front room, and there's no telling how long he was there before he wandered back to bother us."

Angstrom swore again. "That's just great. Now we'll probably have him underfoot all summer. Everywhere we go, there he'll be, driving God's own Winnebago."

Sally said, "God's own what?"

Angstrom looked at her. "Thought George would've told you about God's own Winnebago. Polson's got his own little mobile museum. He calls it God's own Winnebago. It's full of evidence, alleged, that people and dinosaurs co-existed, evolution's part of some great evil conspiracy, I don't know what all. He takes it out to Glen Rose and harangues the tourists as they go into the park to see the dino tracks. He's associated with crackpot groups all over Texas and Oklahoma."

"Well, he didn't get near our eohippuses," Sally said. "I was standing between them and him the whole time."

"She was standing there with a nail-gun in her hand the whole time," said George. There was malicious glee in his chuckle. "Good thing for Polson it wasn't Brian. Brian would've stapled him to a wall and hung an exhibit card around his neck. Homo not so sapiens, extinct."

"Well, what did the man want this time?"

Sally said, "I sort of gathered he'd just got himself shown out of the Memorial Museum. He was all steamed up about conspiracy and the scientific establishment and stuff."

"As usual. How'd you get rid of him?"

"Used a strong grease-cutter!" George said, grinning and leaning forward. "No, get this, this is the best part. Here's this two-hundred-fifty-pound Pillsbury Doughboy in a bad suit, and *here's* our own little Sally, everybody's favorite hundred-twenty pounds of lady paleontologist—"

She looked at him indignantly. "One-*twelve!*"

"Right. One-twelve. Now. Sally listens to this sweaty madman rave for a full five minutes—"

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"He sprayed me with spittle," she said, "he *breathed* on me," and horror was depicted in her countenance.

"—and then she looks him right in the face and tells him, 'Excuse me, your fly is open.' And he looks down and realizes that the whole time he's been standing there yelling and waving his arms in the air, he's had one tail of his shirt sticking out the front of his pants!"

Angstrom simply hung in his chair and howled laughter. "Oh, my heart," he gasped, patting himself on the chest, "Oh, my!" He wiped away a tear. "Well done, Sally. I almost, *almost* feel sorry for the guy."

"Brian'll love it," said George.

"No kidding. Brian could learn from it, in fact. Couple of years ago, he almost booted some colleague of Polson's right out the door. I mean, tip of toe to seat of pants. What was that clown's name?"

"Letz," said George. "Lentz?"

"Lentschke. Came to the lab one day with a fish tooth or something he claimed he'd found lying inside one of the dino footprints at Glen Rose. I guess he thought it must've been lying there forever and we'd overlooked it or deliberately ignored it."

"Sure," George said, "it's not like stuff ever gets washed down the Palauxy River and deposited on the trackway, right?"

"Well," Angstrom went on, "Lentschke shoves this tooth or whatever into Brian's face and asks him if he knows what it is. Brian had no idea who this guy was, so he answers, perfectly seriously, 'Looks like a fish tooth to me, but I'm not sure. I'm an *ich*nologist, you want an *icthy*ologist.' Lentschke asks him one more time, and Brian tells him again, 'I'm just not sure, why don't you take it across the street to the fish lab?' So Lentschke leaves, and the next thing Brian knows, he's being quoted in this press release from the major crackpot-science group in Dallas, headline: Top Scientist Baffled By Mystery Fossil! Two weeks later, Lentschke's back at the lab on some fresh errand of mischief, and Brian practically vaults over the bench to get at him. I had to grab him and hold him, and I mean, *hold* him. Brian's built like Tarzan. He'd've kicked Lentschke's butt to Waco."

"Should've let him," George said.

"Waco's too close to Austin," Sally said.

Angstrom looked at them reproachfully. "This was serious rage I'm talking about. We're lucky the next press release didn't say, Top Scientist Beats Man's Head In."

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"Well, at least Brian seems to've made his point," George said. "The guy's never been back to the lab."

A county sheriff's office car pulled into the motel parking lot and drew up alongside the van. A thin sheriff's deputy wearing mirror sunglasses got out. He started toward the manager's office, locked looks with Angstrom through the window of the coffee shop, and came inside and straight over to the paleontologists' table.

" 'Scuse me," the deputy said, "you the folks who's with a Brian Barbee?"

"Why, yes."

"Better come with me down to the county courthouse."

"Oh, no," George said. "Brian's gone and punched somebody out."

The deputy's head swiveled toward him. The big reflective lenses and the pinched mouth made Angstrom think of praying mantises. "Your Brian Barbee's *dead.*"

Sheriff Boyd Daigle let his bloodshot eyes flicker briefly over George and Sally, and it was obvious to Angstrom that the man disapproved of the one graduate student's beard and the other's very presence. Daigle was about sixty years old, a big, knobby, sunburned man with a face like a dried apple. The main elements of decor in his office at the county courthouse were gunracks, stuffed birds, and deer antlers. He said, "Thought there was one more of you."

"My other grad student's back at the motel," Angstrom said. "He's got a stomach virus. I left a message for him, if he wakes up." He looked down at his own strong, leather-skinned hands. They seemed about half the size of the sheriff's. "What happened to Brian?"

The sheriff turned slightly in his swivel chair and nodded toward Sally. "Sure you want her to hear this?"

"Don't stop on my account," Angstrom heard her say. He looked around at her. She was as pale as chalk.

"Suit yourself, Miss Hoffman."

"Hofner," she said.

"Suit yourself, Miss Hofner." Daigle transferred his attention back to Angstrom. "We got the body back just a little while ago and ain't had time to do the autopsy yet. But it pretty much looks like somebody hit your Professor Barbee smack between the eyes with a blunt instrument. Dropped him like a poleaxed cow."

Angstrom shivered. One of the graduate students sitting behind him groaned. He had no idea whether it was Sally or George. He swallowed hard and said, "Do you know who did it?"

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"Well, we're working on finding out who."

Angstrom could think of nothing to say except, "Are you *sure* it's Brian?"

"Ray," Daigle said to a deputy who had been standing next to a file cabinet near the door. Ray was an onion-shaped man with an unholstered pistol stuck into the waistband of his trousers. A convenient bulge of fat held the gun securely in place. He picked a large manilla envelope off the top of the file cabinet and brought it over to the sheriff. Daigle undid the clasp with a flick of a thumbnail as big around as a quarter and emptied the contents onto his desk blotter. There was a thick, sealed business envelope with "$127.43 cash, $450 travel checks, Visa, Chevron, Diam. Shamrock" and initials scrawled on it. There were two ballpoint pens, a wristwatch, a key ring with six keys on it, a pocket-sized notebook, and a worn brown leather wallet. Daigle scooped up the wallet in his catcher's-mitt-sized hand and flipped it open to the driver's license. He held it up so that Angstrom could see the picture on the license.

"I'm real sure, Professor Angstrom." He closed the wallet and put it down. "This is all the loose stuff your friend had on him. There's also a knapsack, toolbelt, and a U. T. van full of camping gear and things. The van's still out to the Ullrich ranch." He picked up the envelope containing the money. "All you sci'ntists this well-heeled?"

"It's the start of dinosaur season," Angstrom said. "The field season. Brian and Terry—that's Terry Sharp, my sick grad student at the motel—Brian and Terry were planning to spend most of the summer camped out at the Ullrich ranch. That money would've had to last them. Food and gas, mainly. A beer every now and then."

"Would of had to be beer. Ain't nothing else in the whole county."

"Brian's—Brian wasn't much of a drinker."

"I'm sure it's just as well." The sheriff shoveled everything back into the manilla envelope and returned it to Deputy Ray. "Big man drinks a lot, he's liable to be a handful for somebody. Now, near as the M. E. can tell, your friend was killed sometime late yesterday afternoon. Duane Ullrich's boy, Ron, found him around dawn this morning. Ron was going fishing under the bridge down from where the dinosaur footprints is. Suppose you help me fit all this into a time frame."

Angstrom said, "Brian and Terry and I left Austin on Tuesday. We spent the afternoon and the next morning looking around at several sites in Blanco County and camped out at one of them. We got here about three yesterday. Terry was starting to feel pretty bad

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by then, so I checked him into the motel with me. Brian took the van out to the ranch. The last time I saw him was just a little before four, in the parking lot."

"Duane Ullrich says your friend come by the ranch about half past to say hello." Daigle indicated Sally and George with a nod. "What about these two?"

"They had an exhibit of horse fossils to finish for the Nature Center Annex in Austin. They weren't able to leave town until early this morning. The original plan was for the three of us, George and Sally and me, to go on to Big Bend this weekend. Big Bend's usually where we spend most of the season."

"I been to Big Bend." Daigle looked past Angstrom, at, it seemed to him, Sally. "Park or no, it ain't the sort of place I'd pick for summer vacation." The bloodshot gaze returned to Angstrom. "Duane had his boy show Professor Barbee down to the creek, and then Ron walked back. It's about a mile from the house to as close to the creek as you can get a vehicle in, unless you want to go all the way around and use the old county road. Runs behind the Ullrich property and brings you right to the old bridge. From where the van's parked to where the footprints is is about another half a mile. Now, the plan was for all five of you to camp out there?"

"Everyone except me," said Angstrom. "I usually get a motel room if there's one close enough."

"How come?"

"It's the privilege of emeriti."

The sheriff blinked. "Of who?"

"Emeriti. Plural of emeritus." Angstrom gave the sheriff a wan smile. "Meaning, old buzzards like me." Daigle did not respond to the smile, and Angstrom felt it go away. "Can we go out to the trackway, Sheriff?"

"I guess you have to. I guess the University of Texas will want its van back. But I better take you. We been over the area once already, but I don't want it disturbed until we been over it again, real good."

"I know how not to disturb an area."

"Well, that's good. Maybe while we're out there, you can explain to me how Professor Barbee'd let somebody just walk up and hit him between the eyes."

Everyone in Sheriff Daigle's office was silent for a long moment. Finally, Angstrom turned in his chair, and to George and Sally he said, "I think you'd better go back to the motel and stay with Terry."

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The two graduate students exchanged glances, and Sally said, "Meaning, *I* should go back?"

"This is going to be unpleasant."

"It's already unpleasant. It's already gone a long way *past* unpleasant. I've—I want to go with you."

"Look," said George, "*I'll* go babysit Terry." He looked almost hopefully at Angstrom. "Did you tell Terry in your note—about Brian?"

Angstrom shook his head. "I was hoping this'd all turn out to be a mistake."

"Guess you want me to tell him, huh?"

"Use your own judgment." Angstrom handed him the room key. "Do what you think is best. Only don't wake him up just to tell him. If he's asleep, let him go on sleeping."

"Right. Well." George puffed out his bearded cheeks and exhaled with a soft hiss. "Guess I'll see you back at the motel," he said. He turned, and was gone.

Sheriff Daigle gave Sally an unhappy look. "We've moved the body, but there's lots of blood out there. Sure you want to do this?"

"Either order me to go back with George, or catch up with the times. I *want* to do this." She waited for either Angstrom or the sheriff to reply, and then, when neither of them did, she said, "Fine. I need a restroom."

"End of the hall," said Deputy Ray, "door on the right." She left.

Daigle said, "She got something to prove?"

"She's still hacked off about Antarctica."

The sheriff raised eyebrows that were like tufts of steel wool. "Don't get you."

"A couple of years back, the professor she'd been working with at Texas Tech decided to go look for fossils in Antarctica. He refused to take her along. Said Antarctica was no place for a woman."

"From what I hear, it ain't." The sheriff looked thoughtful for a moment. "She know Professor Barbee very well?"

"Of course. They've been working together at the Austin lab for almost two years."

"I mean, did she know him really well?"

"Ah. No. I don't think so. Brian has a girlfriend. Had a—oh, God, I forgot all about Larraine." He looked at the sheriff almost pleadingly. "I'd better give her a call."

"Let it wait a little while."

"Sheriff, who do you think could've killed Brian?"

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"Well, he just might of run into trouble with transients." Daigle swiveled behind his desk and gestured at a large county map framed in glass on the wall. "I spend a goodly amount of time driving people to the county line and letting 'em off. This is a, what you call a hunger county. There's not many jobs here, and the ones there is is taken. So I just tell people moving through to keep right on moving. Mostly it's younger people. Sometimes it's families with children, and if that don't break your heart. But sometimes it's somebody who's just plain bad news."

The sheriff's chair squeaked a protest as he reached for a yardstick. He raised an amazing length of arm, and there was a small, hard click as the tip of the yardstick tapped against the glass.

"That there's the Ullrich ranch," he said. "And that—" click "—is the creek and the old county road. Folks like Duane, living out a ways from town, keep a loaded shotgun handy. For rattlesnakes and other troublemakers. But I don't think a transient killed your friend. Ain't no sign of a camp, for one thing. For two, hundred and twenty-some-odd dollars is a lot of money to pass up. Plus, they'd of taken everything else he had on him."

"Then who else could've done it?"

The tufted steel-wool eyebrows met over the bridge of Daigle's nose. "There's people who's involved in drugs."

"Drugs?" Sally said. "Serious, heavy drugs, out *here?*"

She and Angstrom were in the back seat of a county sheriff's office car. The thin deputy with the mirror sunglasses was driving. Sheriff Daigle seemed to fill half of the cabin. He looked back at her and smiled sardonically.

"This is one of our slow weeks," he said. "Last month, we caught two brothers running a speed lab in their barn. They still report stuff like that in Austin?"

"They love to report stuff like that in Austin," Angstrom said.

Daigle nodded. "Good. I hate to think in the big city everybody thinks we got our thumbs up our behinds here. 'Scuse my language, Miss. Out here, you got your people raising marijuana and running it all over the southwest. You got 'em keeping open the lines of communication for the big-city family businesses, if you know what I mean. The ones that's been involved in some bad crap or other ever since Prohibition days. 'Scuse me. The Central Texas drug pipeline runs right through this county. I got Texas Rangers and federal agents out here nearly all the time. There's parts of this

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county that's as bad as the old Jacksboro Highway up around Fort Worth ever was. I lost a good deputy over to Molley last summer. He pulled over this suspicious truck, and the driver shot him in the chest with a nine mil. My deputy put a forty-four magnum slug through the truck door as he was falling over backwards. Blew the driver all over the inside of the cab."

As Daigle related this, it again seemed to Angstrom that he was studying Sally's face, trying to gauge her reaction. She appeared unimpressed with the sheriff's tales. She looked as tired and irritable as Angstrom felt.

"They report stuff like that back in Austin, too?" said Daigle.

Angstrom repressed a frown. "We were at Big Bend last summer and didn't get the papers. What's this have to do with Brian?"

"Ever' so often," Daigle said, "somebody from Austin or someplace decides to go off hiking or camping in these hills. I guess they stumble into one of the local grower's marijuana fields or see something else they ain't supposed to see. After a bit, somebody back in Austin gets to missing 'em, and I got to go take a look. And never find a thing. If you know a nice, private place where you can plant a whole field of marijuana, you're sure going to know places to stash bodies so they ain't never found. I think your friend just showed up at the wrong place at the wrong time."

Angstrom looked out his window as the deputy swung the car off the main highway, onto a two-lane blacktop. Most of what he actually knew about organized crime and drug-trafficking had been haphazardly gleaned over the years from television news programs and the opening paragraphs of newspaper stories, and it had become thoroughly mixed with images acquired from movies in equally haphazard fashion. He thought of organized criminals, if that was what one called them, as lupine men and occasionally simian men who wore dark shirts, light ties, and sharkskin suits. He could not imagine such men consorting with cowboy-hatted, cowboy-booted Bubba out on the ranch, stepping carefully around cowflops so as not to ruin their expensive suits.

"Over there's the Ullrich place," Daigle said as the car passed a modest but well-tended house and outbuildings. "We'll stop and have a chit-chat with Duane on the way back. Up here's the turnoff to the creek."

Angstrom said, "Is Duane Ullrich one of your local growers?"

The sheriff glowered at him, glanced ahead as the car slowed, left the blacktop, and began crunching over gravel, and then looked back at him with the glower still in place.

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"Duane Ullrich and me," Daigle said, "has been friends all our lives. He's got no more use'n me for drugs or people who's involved in drugs. His boy Ron's okay, too. Now, if Duane *was* growing marijuana on his property, he sure wouldn't invite a bunch of nosy sci'ntists to come walk all over the place. Duane guesses these footprints on his land is probably as good as the Glen Rose ones. He guesses he'll get on television. Think so?"

"It could happen."

"Well, there you are." The sheriff smiled with satisfaction. "If you're involved in drugs, television *ain't* the kind of attention you want to attract."

The car reached the end of the graveltop. The other University of Texas van and another county sheriff's office car were parked on the pebble-carpeted rim of a long, rocky slope. At the bottom of the slope, trees marked the course of the creek. Two deputies stood waiting. The sheriff told his passengers to remain in the car for a minute, and both he and the thin deputy got out and walked over. The four lawmen talked and gesticulated. Angstrom looked at Sally. She sat grim-faced, staring out the window in the direction of the creek. He left her alone.

Daigle and his thin deputy returned. The sheriff opened the rear door on Sally's side and said, "Let's go on down to the creek." The thin deputy opened Angstrom's door for him, then leaned in through the driver's door and came back out holding a pump-action shotgun. He saw the questioning look on the scientist's face and said, "Rattlesnakes." It was the first thing Angstrom could remember hearing him say since breakfast. Breakfast seemed a hundred million years ago.

"Let's reconstruct this," the sheriff said as he and the two paleontologists and the thin deputy moved around to the front of the van. "Professor Barbee parks and gets out. I guess he's real eager, 'cause he just grabs his knapsack and his toolbelt and heads for the creek."

"He wouldn't've been able to think about anything else," Angstrom said. "He was very excited about this trackway."

Daigle pointed downstream. "There's the old bridge. Rickety old iron frame with wood planks laid crossways. Been standing longer than I have. Shakes and rattles in a medium breeze, and, ever' spring, I keep expecting it to wash away. Me, I wouldn't want to ride a bicycle across. But drug-runners is always barreling around on these old roads. I think your friend may of seen something illegal, maybe at the bridge. We found a place on the left bank where some-

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body slid down and then later climbed back up. One person, near as we can tell."

"Why would drug-traffickers just leave Brian lying there?" said Angstrom. "I thought you said the idea was to *not* draw attention to a place."

Daigle shrugged. "Professor Barbee must of weighed, what, two hundred pounds? Mostly solid pounds, too. It's my experience a body always seems to weigh four times more dead than when it was alive. Maybe whoever killed him was in a hurry. Maybe it was hot like now, and they looked at how big he was and said, Forget it."

They walked in file through sparse, calf-high grass, past slabs of rock like petrified mattresses, the deputy leading, the sheriff bringing up the rear. They passed through the trees, crossed the floodline, and went down a steep bank of dry, hard clay, onto a gravel bar. Beyond a narrow ribbon of virtually motionless green water was a long, low table of limestone. The limestone bore scores of impressions of three-toed, claw-tipped feet, some of them with spreads of eighteen inches. Angstrom drew a sharp breath, and for just a moment Brian was forgotten, heat, weariness, age, and everything else were forgotten, as a rapturous awe filled him.

They were right here, he thought. Eighty, eighty-five million years ago, they passed not fifty feet from where I'm standing, and he could *see* them as they passed, forearms tucked daintily against deep chests, great, tooth-filled heads and long, stiff tails held high as they walked, churning up the limy mud with those gargantuan chicken feet of theirs, masters of a world in which Homo sapiens existed not even as a gleam in some ratty little insectivore's eye.

The moment passed, and Angstrom murmured, "Carnosaurs."

"Beg pardon?" said the sheriff.

"A whole pack of carnosaurs." He saw the blank look on the lawman's face. "The big meat-eating dinosaurs. Tyrannosaurus and its lesser cousins."

Daigle seemed almost impressed. "We had T'rannosaurus around here?"

"Probably Acrocanthosaurus. One of the lesser cousins, but still a nasty piece of work."

The sheriff spat to one side. "Guess we're real lucky they're all gone, then. Reverend Bradshaw says they all drowned in Noah's flood."

Angstrom regarded him levelly and said, "What do you say, Sheriff?"

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Daigle matched his look. "I know you people think the world's billions of years old and we all come up from lower animals. I believe in the revealed word of God. If it says everything was made in six twenty-four-hour days, that's good enough for me."

"I'm not attacking your faith, Sheriff."

The sheriff shrugged and gazed at the trackway. "I got nothing against your dinosaurs, either. I saw the bones of some in a museum over to San Antonio last year. My grandson wanted to go. He loves dinosaurs. He was real impressed with the one with all the horns. And he asked me why Noah'd let a big, wonderful thing like that drown but save a lot of nasty little fire ants and scorpions."

"What did you tell him?"

"I said to him, 'Danged if I know.' " They stepped easily across the sunken creek, and then Daigle gestured at the ground. "About here's where Professor Barbee dropped his knapsack and toolbelt." He pointed toward the far end of the limestone bar. "Down there's where he was killed."

Angstrom looked downstream. He frowned and said, "Why'd Brian drop the knapsack and toolbelt here?"

"You're the pee-aitch-dee," Sheriff Daigle said. "You tell me."

They walked carefully across the ancient churned-up surface. At the end of the limestone slab, the sheriff said, unnecessarily, "Here's where Professor Barbee was killed," and, just as unnecessarily, pointed to a large reddish-brown stain on the rock. Metallic-green flies buzzed about the stain and kept alighting on it. Angstrom saw Sally turn her face quickly and saw Daigle give his deputy a told-her-so look.

"Now," the sheriff said, "here's the part nobody understands. Here's your friend digging at this end of the tracks, and he's got a clear view of about a half a mile, from past where he come down the slope to past the bridge. And somebody still walks right up and knocks him in the head."

Angstrom squatted beside the bloodstain and tried to wave the flies away. They easily avoided his hand and went on about their business. "The part *I* still don't get is, if Brian was here, what was his equipment doing back there on the gravel bar?"

"It's hot out on this rock. Maybe he didn't want to lug around a bunch of stuff in the heat."

"Then what was Brian digging *with?*"

"Whatever you use to dig with, I guess."

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"Sheriff, these tracks are still full of sand and grit from last month's floods. Brian never touched them."

Daigle opened his mouth to say something, thought better of it, closed his mouth. He glared around at the ground for a second, then pointed triumphantly at a spot several feet away. "I ain't *entirely* stupid," he growled. "That's fresh-chipped rock there."

Angstrom moved crabwise to the place and ran his hand over it. He motioned to Sally, and she knelt beside him. The two lawmen hesitated for a moment before bending down to peer at the patch of rock between the paleontologists. The sheriff said, "What is it?"

Angstrom gave him a grim look. "I think it's what got Brian Barbee killed."

Daigle peered some more. "So what *is* it?"

"What does it look like?"

The sheriff did not answer immediately. His face slowly folded itself into a complex system of ridges and furrows. At last he said, "A footprint. A real old petrified human footprint."

"Wrong on all counts," Angstrom said. "It's not real, it's no older than yesterday, and it's not a footprint, human or otherwise. The depression that looks sort of like the bottom of a foot is just a shallow basin made by erosion. There's none of the squishing that occurs when an object's pushed down into mud and then pulled out. The toe marks were carved by the same person who killed Brian."

The lawmen stepped back as the paleontologists stood up. Daigle's expression was skeptical. The deputy gnawed the inside of a cheek for a second, then said, "There's human footprints mixed in with the dinosaur ones up at Glen Rose."

"I've seen them," said Angstrom. "They're fakes, too, the work of someone in the so-called creation-science movement."

The deputy's knuckles began to whiten on the shotgun. "Reverend Bradshaw from our church went up and seen 'em, too. He *preached* about 'em. They ain't no more fakes than these."

"It's unweathered, fresh-chipped rock, Frank," Daigle said to the deputy, very gently. "Even I can see that." He looked unhappy as he turned back to Angstrom and sounded unhappy when he spoke. "You're saying somebody killed your friend and then carved these toe marks."

"It was probably the other way around."

"Professor Angstrom," said the sheriff, "I know a lot of fine people who hate your evolution theories even more'n I do. Ain't one of 'em's ever struck me as being the least bit murderous."

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Angstrom looked the big lawman right in the eye and said, "Like I said, I'm not attacking faith here, just bad science. But you of all people should know that anybody who gets mad enough or scared enough can kill. Brian could be plenty scary. He was a strong, very physical man, something of a hothead, too. He despised the creation-science movement with what I can only describe as crusading fervor. He was an ichnologist. That's a paleontologist whose specialty is fossil footprints, only in his case, it was more, it was his passion. He was excited about this trackway. He'd've regarded these carvings as a desecration, just like he regarded the ones at Glen Rose. I think when he came down the bank and through the trees back there, he saw someone chipping at the rock here and knew immediately what was going on. I think he shed his equipment and came charging over like a mad bull. Probably he was screaming bloody murder. I think he'd've done some serious pushing and shoving when he got hold of whoever was here."

"And whoever was here," said Daigle, "just hauled off and hit him with a hammer or chisel and then run off in a panic." He nodded toward the bridge. "Run off that way, same way as he come in, so he must of had a car or something parked up there. Duane said the only person who come by yesterday was Professor Barbee. But if the person who made these marks didn't come expecting to be attacked by your friend, why'd he go to all the bother of using that old back road?"

"So the toe marks would *be here*." Angstrom made a gesture that took in the whole trackway. "A spectacular site like this is going to draw a fair amount of media attention. I'm sure the idea was for somebody to show up at about the time the television coverage was heaviest, point to the supposed human footprint, say, 'Look what the scientific establishment can't deny but won't acknowledge.' "

"I guess it'd hurt your case some, huh?"

Angstrom shook his head emphatically. "Not in the least. Any reputable scientist would take one look at this alleged footprint and know it's a fake. Creation science is long on this kind of thing because it's short on everything else. Nothing its proponents could do to this site in an excess of zeal would hurt our case or help theirs."

"The maps," said Sally, quietly.

Angstrom and the sheriff turned to stare at her.

"We had all our maps out in the front room," she said, "where anybody who walked into the lab could've seen them. If he wanted

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to get even for what happened and strike a blow for the cause at the same time—"

"Oh, *no!*" Angstrom cried out. "Not *him!*"

"—all he had to do, if there's anyone here who's in the movement, was pick up the phone and get directions."

"Polson!" Angstrom shrieked. *"Polson!"*

Daigle scowled. "Now who's Polson?"

Angstrom beat his fist against the eighty-million-year-old rock. "Look for a man making a getaway in God's own Winnebago."

DETECTIVERSE

ANOTHER GRAVE TONE

by JAMES HOLDING

Here lies the body of Fred Dunlop,
A smart but alcoholic cop,
Whose name was often in the news
For solving a crime from meager clues,
For trapping a killer or catching a crook
And bringing such criminal types to book.
Fred's feats were many, but in between he
Was an avid fan of the dry martini
And sometimes indulged in its sparkling beauty
Until he was beyond the call of duty.
On one such day, as the principal player,
Fred trapped an elusive serial slayer
And, after extracting the man's confession,
Drank six martinis in quick succession,
Quite naturally wanting to celebrate
His latest achievement for the state.
Then to show his pride in the whole affair,
He fired his pistol into the air.
He aimed at the broad sky overhead,
But the shot went into Fred's head instead.
And that is why he is lying here
Restricted henceforth to a single bier.

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a distinguished reprint by

ROY VICKERS

By special request from one of our long-standing subscribers, we are pleased to bring back into print one of the most psychologically compelling of the Department of Dead Ends stories by Roy Vickers. Mr. Vickers won the Ellery Queen contest in 1953 for a story we reprinted last year ("Double Image"). His inverted detective stories involving the bureau of Scotland Yard taxed with the clearing up of old, forgotten cases are among the most brilliant of their kind . . .

BLIND MAN'S BLUFF

by ROY VICKERS

Until he committed murder, Robert Swilbey was a model citizen. Everyone admired him for one or another of his qualities, including the go-getters who admired only his business abilities. The example of his courage under a devastating affliction helped other sufferers. Many who knew him well would speak of him almost reverently.

Yet he was, in vulgar parlance, a tough guy, with a toughness that would have frightened any gangster who had brain enough to understand it—a toughness with which even Scotland Yard was impressed.

"That man," said Chief Inspector Karslake, "practices all the virtues as if they were vices." All that, from Karslake, after a single murder!

His father was a country solicitor who, perceiving Robert to be something exceptional, scraped and saved and sent him to the Bar. He died when Robert was twenty-three, leaving him about a thou-

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sand pounds. Having no influence, Robert at first secured only dock briefs in defense of impecunious criminals. Through these he soon attracted favorable attention. But as his income remained perilously low, he occupied his spare time in writing sketches for West End revues—cheeky little seven-minute playlets—with enough success to enable him to carry on at the Bar without dipping into his small reserve.

His knowledge of law was but little above the average, but his advocacy was of a high order, and he had the adroitness of an old hand in humoring his judges. His early success was helped, in some measure, by his magnificent physique, his full-toned voice, and his handsome face. Win or lose, he always made the most of his case. As generally happens to young defenders who show consistent ability, the Crown gave him a chance to function as prosecutor.

In his fourth year at the Bar, when he was twenty-six, he earned nearly a thousand pounds—six hundred in practice, the balance deriving from a minute share in the royalties of a revue to which he had contributed three playlets. He was already crawling along the road to success—a road along which he intended to gallop.

He had surprised himself by falling in love with Mildred Keltson, the daughter of a doctor who had attended him for a trifling ailment. Women tended to favor him: he had had his share of adventures and believed himself free from the danger of serious entanglement. But Mildred did not appear to him as an entanglement. Tall and exquisitely shaped, with grey-green eyes and chestnut hair, intelligent and perceptive but temperamentally docile, she attracted him as he had not been attracted before. Considered impartially, he told himself, she was an ideal wife for a man such as himself. He proposed and was accepted in February: they were to be married in the Easter vacation.

In this phase he is seen only as a successful young man obviously destined for a brilliant career. He was bumptious, but no more so than any other rising barrister, and certainly no tougher. The toughness was, as it were, flashed into being, a few days before the Easter vacation, by a wretched woman called May Dinton, the associate of a burglar whom Swilbey was prosecuting.

It required no great ingenuity on Swilbey's part to destroy the alibi the girl was trying to create for her man. But he carried on for another hour and with some subtlety extracted from her additional facts which aggravated the prisoner's guilt.

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At dusk, when Swilbey was returning to his lodgings, May Dinton appeared from behind a pillar box.

"You got my boy seven years when the cops said the judge 'ud only give 'im three," she accused.

"My dear girl, what the cops say has nothing to do with me. I am sorry if you have been made unhappy, but you know that sort of thing is my job."

"You did more than you had to do for your pay. Twistin' my words round like that! You've made Ted think I ratted on him. But he won't think it any more—*now!*"

He had seen her draw a broad-stoppered bottle from under her coat: he supposed indifferently that she was about to swallow poison. He put up no guard—with the result that some three fluid ounces of vitriol splashed into his face.

On regaining consciousness after the operation, he asked when he would be likely to recover the use of his eyes. The doctor stalled, but broke down under Swilbey's expert questioning.

"Very well! Perhaps you'd better take the full shock while you are under our care. I am very sorry, Mr. Swilbey—there is no hope at all. Moreover—well, bluntly, old man, for appearance's sake, you'll have to wear two glass eyes."

"Thank you," said Swilbey. In the time it took to utter those two words he re-planned his career.

Inspector Karslake himself had come to the hospital. They were personally acquainted, and respected each other's work.

"D'you feel strong enough now, Mr. Swilbey, to tell us what happened?"

"I haven't the least idea."

It was not the smallest of Swilbey's achievements that he was able to think clearly while his body was racked with pain.

"We know it was May Dinton," prompted Karslake.

"But you can't prove it or we shouldn't be talking about it—you'd charge her. Sorry, Karslake! I can't afford vengeance. Got to be very economical. Got to avoid law courts. Got to forget I was once a lawyer."

The bumptious young barrister had been drowned in three ounces of vitriol, and Swilbey's unquenchable vitality was already creating a new personality, which had to be coddled during its infancy. He must forget May Dinton as well as the Law. The new personality must have no grievance against life, or it would not make the grade.

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Through a nurse, he wrote to Mildred: *Please don't come to see me until the pain has passed. Pain in your presence would confuse me.*

These words show he was aware that, no matter how much his personality might change, he would still have a normal nervous system, would still be sensitive to the charm of women, with all its disturbances.

Mildred's father visited him every day. Swilbey found the visits tedious, except when they were talking about Mildred.

"You'll very soon feel well enough to let her come, won't you?"

"Practically ready now. Say the day after tomorrow."

"I'll tell her." Dr. Keltson cleared his throat. "There's one thing I want to mention before then. I can safely say that Mildred will keep her promise to marry you, if she sees that you wish to—er—hold her to it."

"There's no means by which a man can 'hold' a woman to such a promise."

"Oh, yes, there is, my friend!" The father was fighting for his daughter's happiness and dared not soften his words. "When Mildred accepted you, you were on the threshold of a brilliant career. She must have looked forward—quite properly—to sharing fame and prosperity with you. By a tragic accident you can now offer her only poverty and a treadmill of small services to yourself. Show that you expect her to stick to you, and she will. As would any woman of character."

Dr. Keltson had done his painful duty. The answer brought him but cold comfort.

"You want me to humbug her with a wistful little speech about my not having the right to blight her life. Wistfulness is not in my program. You needn't worry. I shall not blight her life. I shall give her a square deal."

He meant what he said. Indeed, Swilbey never lied to himself nor anyone else—except, eventually, to the police. But he failed to see that in the matter of Mildred he had appointed himself judge in his own cause—to his own ultimate ruin.

When she came to the hospital, he was still bandaged—was in a chair on a terrace overlooking the river. A motor launch was passing and he did not hear her approach.

"I'm here, Robert," she said and thrust her hand in his. The significance of having to announce herself to him upset her self-control. A tear dropped on his wrist.

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"Darling, you've got the wrong slant on this!" he exclaimed eagerly. "To us it won't make any essential difference. I've adapted my thoughts to it and know I can manage it. Listen! Believe I'm telling the truth and not just trying to cheer you up. These last few seconds—while I've been holding your hand—I've taken a great leap forward. You've touched some nerve or other. I can *visualize!*"

"I'm glad, dear, but I don't understand. Go on talking about it—it'll make it easier."

"Darkness!" he exclaimed. "At first you're always waiting, waiting for the light. Having breakfast in total darkness! It muddles your other senses, produces a sort of animal fear. I found difficulty in thinking of things by their shape and color. But now—holding your hand—I can see the sun shining on your hair, making the wavy bit in front look like copper wire. I can get the angle of the sun, too. It doesn't matter a damn if the sun isn't actually shining at the moment. The important thing is that I can visualize the effect of light under the stimulus of an emotional urge—meaning you. That guarantees I shall be able to visualize stage lighting."

Fascinated by the mechanism of his own brain, he pursued his thoughts in silence, which she broke.

"While you're here, could I come every day to teach you Braille?"

"I'm not going to learn Braille—nor anything else the blind learn. I'm not going to be a blind man. I'm an ordinary man, who can't see."

That which she believed to be his pathetic courage, his gallant faith in the wreck of himself, destroyed her judgment—though it is easy to see, even at this stage, that there was no pathos in his courage, and that he had not been wrecked by his blindness.

"This is the program. I've got one toe in the theatre with those sketches. I intend to plant both feet. Now, when I've paid up here I shall have about fourteen hundred pounds, all told. I shall want five hundred for my working expenses, which will include the purchase of a dictaphone."

He proceeded to detail a practical plan of domestic finance. "Allow a hundred and fifty for our honeymoon and unforeseen expenses after we move in, and we shall have a reserve of eighteen months at the rate of five hundred a year. I shall be well in the swim within six months. Have you made notes of all this?"

"Yes, Robert." Prudence was awakening. Suppose he were not "well in the swim"—ever?

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"If you'll see my bank manager we'll fix a power of attorney so that you can deal with the checks and the contracts. Remember, I can't sign my name. By the way, you'll have to do a lot of reading for me at first. Shall you mind?"

She answered that she would not mind. Her tone made him ask:

"I say, darling! The program as a whole? Including me? I've been rushing on, building a new life on your shoulders. Feel like it—or not?"

She was, in the words of her father, a woman of character. To leave him in the lurch would be utterly impossible. She bent and kissed him.

"It will be wonderful—building together," she said, which was exactly what he had expected her to say. He visualized the expression on her face as she said it. But the visualized expression was quite different from her actual expression of honest doubt of herself and him.

"I shall have these bandages off in a fortnight," he told her—and altogether failed to visualize the shudder that followed his words.

For the next few years we see Robert Swilbey as the embodiment of the virtues extolled in the literature of success. In him character really did triumph against enormous odds. He did laugh at his setbacks. He did believe that failure was impossible. Also, of course, "luck came to him who earned it." His stage plays happened to be adaptable to a certain comedian in whom Hollywood had sunk a good deal of capital, and Swilbey's rates rose with each success.

In his first year he climbed on Mildred's shoulders more than he realized. Indeed, Mildred herself did not know that it was she who put him so quickly into the West End. His first full-length farcical comedy was tried out in the provinces, seven months after their wedding. It was under-capitalized and badly mounted and was in some danger of collapse, when Turley Wain saw it in Liverpool.

Wain was a company promoter, mainly in the cotton market, with no expert knowledge of the theatre, who had the amateur's belief that he could spot a winner. He was impressed by Swilbey's dynamic drive, but he was more impressed, in a different way, by Mildred's courage and devoted care. He could see that he was in a position to dictate terms, but in Mildred's presence he held his hand and let Swilbey drive him. True that he eventually made money out of the play. But Swilbey made so much that he was able to finance his next play himself. Before the run had ended, Wain came to live in

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London and thereafter saw much of Mildred, without suspecting danger.

At the end of six years, living in affluence and with strong financial reserves, Swilbey believed that his marriage was as successful as his career. He was unaware that after the first eighteen months of struggle Mildred had been extremely unhappy. Even on their honeymoon he had refused to perceive that her feeling for him had become exclusively maternal and protective. This feeling had been steadily thwarted by his progressive efficiency.

While they were still comparatively poor she had the arduous task of keeping him abreast of events and ideas by reading to him for long stretches every day. Then she had to take him for walks and in the intervals run the home with inadequate assistance. But the comradeship of it sustained her, gave her a sense of fulfillment.

Yet even in this first phase of their marriage, she had what one may call the first premonition of the ultimate disaster. She took her fear to her father.

"He drives himself so hard, Daddy. And although in a way it's all so splendid, I'm a little worried as to whether it's quite—healthy. I know you'll think I'm a fool—I think so myself—but this happens. When we're discussing plans for the week, he speaks as if he and I were making arrangements about someone else. He even says: *he* must go to that rehearsal, and if we can get *him* back in good time we'll let *him* try a re-write of that last scene before *he* goes to bed. The frightening part is that it's not meant to be funny. He only speaks like that when he is very concentrated."

"There's nothing in that," said Dr. Keltson. "I suspect you've been reading some stuff about split personality without, my dear, quite understanding what you read. I'm no psychiatrist, but I tell you that, though it does attack exceptionally clever people sometimes, there's no fear at all with a balanced, mentally disciplined man like Robert. I've never met any man I admire more—for mental discipline, I mean."

Six years later, she again approached her father on the same subject.

"He's begun to 'split' me now," she told him. "Yesterday, I read a contract to him. He said: 'Ah! *There's* something for him to tell his wife!' And he did tell me how wonderful he is. This time, he spoke as if I knew nothing about the contract."

Dr. Keltson was still unimpressed. He asked: "Anything else? Has he any morbid habits?"

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"Not that I know of. But I see so little of him except for business, or when others are there. He won't go for walks any more. He 'goes for a row' in that rowing contraption in the gym that makes a noise like a real boat on real water. And a bicycle-thing that can make him feel he's going up and down hills. And he has a journalist to read to him. If anything gets in his way he invents an expensive gadget so that he need not ask me to help him. He has so built things round him—things and persons—that I don't believe he any longer wishes he could see. Perhaps that's morbid."

"You aren't happy with him, Mildred, are you?"

"No!" She added: "What makes it uncanny is that he *is* happy with me. I suppose I'm beastly to him pretty often. It never hurts his feelings. He never retaliates—just cleverly makes me feel ashamed of myself. And then"—she shuddered—"we make up!"

"Well, at least he is loyal to you. At the back of my mind—"

"Loyal?" It was as if she asked herself a question. "Women run after him. He's so big and strong—and handsome, if you can ignore his poor, staring eyes. But I think he's afraid they might put him out of his stride. He's positively Victorian with them. When he's going to rehearse a new actress he sends for me. He says to the girl: 'It's essential that I should be able to visualize you. May I touch you?' And then I have to chip in and say something pleasant."

"At the back of my mind—"

" 'May I touch you!' " she repeated bitterly. "With me standing by to make it impersonal and uncompromising. That's what I'm for. I'm not his wife. I'm just—*women!*"

"At the back of my mind, my dear girl, there has been for some time the feeling that I ought to warn you that there are whispers about your friendship with Mr. Wain. I know there can be nothing in it—but there it is!"

About the same time the whisper reached Swilbey.

Every Tuesday night Swilbey gave a party in his house in St. John's Wood, near theatre-land. For the rest of the week he was strictly not-at-home to anybody to whom he had not given a definite appointment.

In the lofty L-shaped drawing room that was also his working room he would hold an inner court round his gadget-laden armchair.

Now and again he would rise and walk among his guests, who were required merely to avoid impeding his progress. His system enabled him always to know where he was standing in his house or in the theatre. On first nights he could walk unaided to the proper

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spot from which to take his author's call—for which purpose he wore spectacles and a careful makeup; for he did not wish his public to know that he "could not see."

It was by the bend of the "L" that he overheard the whisper; and for the first time since he lost his sight he found himself shirking a reality.

For some days he vacillated. Mildred's behavior to himself was the same as it had been for years. He worked out ways of asking her for details—a frank approach. But in his heart he was afraid of receiving a frank answer that would break the smooth routine of his career. On the fourth day he wrote to Wain, under a thin pretense of being able to offer him another flutter in the theatre.

He received him, as he received everybody, alone in the drawing room.

"I say, old man! Some infernal scandalmongers have been coupling your name with Mildred's. I thought you and I had better get together about it. Cards on the table and all that!"

He was alarmed by the length of the pause before Wain answered.

"Before I say anything else, Swilbey, I have nothing to confess to you. I've never so much as touched her hand. I can't imagine what is being said. We have always taken care not to give the talkers a chance."

That killed the last hope that there might be nothing in it. Wain seemed to think that Mildred had already discussed it.

"I'd better go on." Wain's voice sounded unctuous and sentimental. "I've been in love with her for years, and shall be all my life. But I doubt whether she knows it's any more than friendship. Anyhow, if circumstances were normal I would speak to her—then ask you for a divorce. I've told you all there is to tell, Swilbey."

"I appreciate that." The fellow, thought Swilbey, was a mere sentimentalist, who would run from a challenge. "But I don't follow that bit about 'normal circumstances.' Why not speak to her? I have never regarded women as property. I stake no prior claim. How do we know she wouldn't be happier with you?"

Sentimentalist or not, Wain shook the edifice of six years with his answer.

"Swilbey, you asked for cards on the table. So you'll let me say that we both know she would be happier with me—if I could retain my self-respect. But how could I? Knowing I had taken his wife from a blind man?"

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In the recesses of Swilbey's brain, a voice was speaking about Swilbey: *That'll upset him—calling him a blind man! Mind he doesn't do anything rash.*

Through darkness the other voice, that of Wain, penetrated.

"To Mildred your well-being is a sacred mission, Swilbey. Her power of attorney has more than legal significance. She stands between you and the outside world with which you could not cope, even with all your assistants and servants. You would be the first to acknowledge that you owe your career not only to your own qualities but also to hers."

Again came the illusion of an inner voice speaking: *Look out! That'll make him worse. Wain is telling him that he's a blind man living on the charity of his wife's eyes.*

"I quite agree." Swilbey's voice was calm as ever. "By the way, years ago—when I was starting—did you finance my play because of Mildred?"

"N-no. At least, I don't think so. Not altogether. Does it matter, now?"

The personality had been thumped into numbness. Only the mannerisms remained active—and some resolution he did not yet understand. Swilbey rose from his chair.

"I'm glad we've had this talk. One way and another, Wain, you've been a factor in my life. I would like to be able to visualize you. May I touch you?"

"Of course! I'm a shrimp compared to you."

"Yes, you're shorter. And you've kept slim." The hands crept lightly to the head, crept over the features, outlining the heavy, prominent chin with a dimple in it, crept below the chin to the throat—

Don't let him do anything rash!

But how would it be possible to keep "him" quiet? For the first time in six years, consciousness of the perpetual darkness returned, and with it the animal fear.

At six o'clock, Menceman, the journalist, came as usual with a digest of the day's papers. Swilbey barely heard a word throughout the hour's reading. At seven-thirty, when he was going upstairs to prepare for dinner, he crashed into the balustrade.

The parlormaid, who had been with him for years, gasped with astonishment. Never before had she seen him miss his direction.

"Have you hurt yourself, sir?"

"No, thanks. My foot slipped," he lied.

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That evening, alone with Mildred in her little sittingroom upstairs, he got up to go to bed, faltered, and then: "Will you take me to my room, please?"

Sheer astonishment made her ask: "Why, Robert?"

"Because I'm blind!" he cried, and broke down like a child.

The next day Mildred beat down his protests and took him for a holiday up the river where he could scull for hours while she steered. The first nervous crisis passed. She made no mention of Wain.

He evolved, during the holiday, an interim personality—an understudy to sustain the role of Robert Swilbey. All the mannerisms were faithfully copied, but the inspiration was lacking. The interim personality could not write dialogue that sparkled with clever nonsense. He was working then on *Playgirl Wanted,* but had to abandon it before he had completed the first act.

"Menceman, I'm going to try my hand at straight drama. I shall have a background of police work, treated realistically. You might begin by going through the verbatim reports of trials, picking out the small points overlooked by intelligent murderers."

Now and again, the inner voice would register a half-hearted warning. *He's planning to kill Wain. Better humor him.*

"David Durham advised me to have a model theatre on the table beside me, as he does," he told Mildred. "Of course, my sense of touch isn't developed enough for that sort of thing. But I could rig up a model stage at the other end of the drawing room." He meant at the short end of the "L." "Scale about one to four, I should think. I could use it, too, for rehearsing special scenes."

He spent sixteen hundred pounds on what became not a model but miniature stage, with many of the fitments of a full-sized stage. Unable to concentrate enough for original work, he rehearsed revivals on the miniature stage.

At rehearsals he necessarily worked through a subordinate stage manager.

"I want to be able to handle the rigging myself—get the feel of controls," said Swilbey, because he now knew that he intended to hang Wain, thereby giving the murder the outward semblance of an execution.

There is no doubt that Swilbey planned the murder of Wain in minute detail. But there is considerable doubt whether he meant to carry it out. Remember that daydreams and fancies and castles-in-the-air possess a special kind of reality to a playwright—they be-

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come as real to him as a parcel of speculative shares is to a businessman.

In a sense, Swilbey soothed his wounded ego by murdering Wain every night. The taunt of being a blind man, who could only hold his woman by invoking her pity, was nightly avenged by the fatal blow that was not actually struck. Nightly, too, the heads of Scotland Yard were made to confess themselves beaten by the dazzling brilliance of Robert Swilbey—a man who, as it happened, could not see.

Certain it is that for two years he made no attempt to use the "engine of death," as counsel called it—more simply, the essential parts of a gallows, disguised as rigging for shifting scenes and the heavier stage properties. Nor did he take any step to lure Wain to the house. Ironically, Wain was, as it were, put on the spot by Mildred herself.

"I want to ask something of you, Robert," she began. "About Turley Wain. It's two years now since he gave you an explanation. He told me at the time that you had been very kind to him.

"He was very kind to me. I told him I'd fix a divorce, if you wanted it."

He hoped she would say she had never, and would never, want a divorce. But she did not. The darkness came down on him again.

"We exchanged parting gifts. I have only seen him once since then. Today. He is very changed. I drew from him that things have gone very badly with him, and he expects to be made bankrupt. Will you help him?"

"Of course, I will! Apart from your friendship with him, he did me a good turn when he financed *Brenda Gets Married.*"

He felt her approaching. The darkness vanished as he visualized her physical beauty against the background of a sun-lit flower garden. She thanked him warmly—because he had said he would help Turley Wain.

"When shall I tell him to come and see you about it?"

In the nightly murder Wain always arrived at five-thirty on a winter afternoon. And Mildred was always out of the house. He reminded himself now that, on Fridays, Mildred always visited her parents, who were in retirement in Canterbury.

"Next Friday at five-thirty," he answered, and added: "February fifteenth—my birthday—good omen for Wain!"

It was about five-thirty when he came, Inspector. I was in the rehearsal theatre. I showed him the tackle for shifting the heavier

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pieces. That was part of the scene in which the police, every night, were "hopelessly baffled."

On Friday Mildred left for Canterbury after lunch; she would stay for dinner, returning on the last train.

At five-thirty precisely, the parlormaid announced Wain. Speaking from the miniature stage, Swilbey greeted him with the opening lines composed two years ago.

"Hello, Wain! I've just finished here. You haven't seen this little rig-out before, have you?" Swilbey could hear the parlormaid drawing the curtains. He spoke loudly enough for her to hear. "It's the engineering I'm proud of. Have to haul everything up to the flies when we want to change. With the double reduction on these pulleys, a child could manage it—designed the whole thing myself. How's that for a blind man, eh! Have a cigarette?"

He felt for his cigarette case in one pocket and another. Like many a sighted man, he was never sure of his pockets.

"You dropped it on that bench, sir." The parlormaid left the curtains, hurried to the stage, recovered the cigarette case, and handed it to Swilbey.

Wain, who did not know that the very word "blind" was a danger signal, made polite murmurs. When Swilbey heard the parlormaid draw the last curtain, he said:

"Let's go and sit down. I won't bother to put the tackle away."

Back together down now the short arm of the "L," a left turn into the long arm, to his armchair and the group of chairs round it. Swilbey felt the hands of his watch. Five thirty-four. Not a minute to waste.

"Mildred told me you might go bankrupt. How much do you want?"

"Bankruptcy is one thing. There's another!" Judging by his voice, Wain had gone to pieces—he was almost crying. "To leave out technicalities, I got caught in a landslide, Swilbey. I swear to you I didn't try to save myself at the expense of others. I threw in all my own resources, including even my furniture, when I need not have done so. It wasn't nearly enough. In trying to save the investments of others I committed a technical breach of the criminal law. At this moment I am actually wanted by the police."

"Better give me the figures!" Thirty-eight minutes past five. The babble must not last more than another four minutes. And he mustn't forget Wain's cigarette. It might set the house on fire—which would disarrange the plan.

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Wain seemed to shrink from coming to the point.

"Last week a detective came to see me. Very decent fellow. Karslake. He knew you when you were at the Bar. I drew wool over his eyes because I didn't want to be arrested there and then. And now I'm keeping out of his way."

"Wain, old man, how much do you want?"

"The technical breach—well, five thousand pounds would cover that. But look here, Swilbey, I've no excuse for asking you."

"Yes, you have. You and Mildred together made it possible for a blind man to make a living. My career pivots on you two. She hinted that you might want a wad of ready cash. Come with me."

Swilbey felt some squeamishness in promising money that would never be given. But there is no gentlemanly method of committing murder.

"D'you mind putting your cigarette out, old man? Have to be careful of fire where we're going."

On the way back round the turn of the "L" to the rehearsal theatre, he asked: "And what about the bankruptcy?"

"Astronomical! Fifty thousand pounds, if a penny!"

"Hm! We'll have to talk about that later. We're going over the stage. That door at the back is still in use. All right! I can manage. In their own place, the blind can manage as if they were not blind. Mind that pulley!"

Wain, as he had himself said, was a shrimp beside Swilbey. Moreover, he did not know how to use what little weight and strength he had. So the "compensatory fantasy" was translated into reality without muscular strain.

When Wain was dead, Swilbey turned on the main switch which flooded the stage with light. The room lights of the short arm of the "L" had been turned on by the parlormaid.

The parlormaid! Halfway to the corner he stopped. He had a sudden mental picture of the parlormaid handing him his cigarette case after he had dropped it on the bench.

"If I've dropped anything this time—"

He went back to the stage and groped on the bench: he was leaving when his foot touched something on the floor which ought not to have been there. He bent down.

"That damned case again!" Like frightened snakes, his fingers slid over the tessellated pattern of the slim gold case. "Phew! I had a sort of intuition. Subconscious memory. Good! It means *he* won't make any mistakes!"

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He thrust the case into his breast pocket and hurried away.

At four minutes to six, Swilbey, back in his gadget-laden armchair, switched on the radio. Luck again came to him who had earned it. A drama critic was talking.

At six punctually, just as the radio critic was finishing, Menceman, the journalist, came in.

Swilbey turned off the radio and spoke as if Wain were sitting near him.

"Wain," he said, "let me introduce Mr. Menceman who—"

"There's no one in the room but ourselves, Mr. Swilbey."

"Oh, then Wain must have slipped out—I had to listen to that critique. You've heard of Wain—of course! My fairy godfather. Backed my first play. Badly hit in the Slump. Let's have the Slump news first."

There was no fear of Menceman strolling about the room, turning the bend of the "L" and seeing the corpse.

Swilbey gave his full attention. The plan was fulfilling itself. Menceman would leave at seven. By domestic routine a housemaid would discover the body of Turley Wain at seven-thirty, by which time he would be in his room dressing for dinner.

But at nine minutes to seven the sequence of the plan was broken by the house telephone.

"An officer from Scotland Yard, sir. Chief Inspector Karslake. He wants to speak to Mr. Wain."

For a second only Swilbey hesitated.

"Mr. Wain left a long time ago. But tell Mr. Karslake I would like to see him if he can spare the time."

With a nod he dismissed Menceman and concentrated on the problem of the detective.

Swilbey held out his hand and waited, as the blind do, for Karslake to grip it.

"It's good to see you after all these years, Mr. Swilbey. I always take the wife to one of your plays when I get the chance."

"And it's good to hear your voice!" echoed Swilbey. "We must have a chat sometime. At present you've got something on your mind, and Wain has told me what it is. You may take it that will be settled at once—in full."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it, since he's a friend of yours. All the same, I can't stop the machinery at this stage, as you know. Can I see him, please?"

"He's not here," said Swilbey. "Left about six."

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There was a short, strained silence.

"Mr. Swilbey, his coat and hat are in your vestibule."

"Surely not! Wait a minute." On the house telephone he spoke to the parlormaid.

"What time did Mr. Wain leave?"

"He hasn't left, sir. I thought he was in the drawing room with you."

Swilbey repeated the girl's words.

"Then d'you mean to say he sneaked out of the room without saying goodbye or anything?" asked Karslake.

"Apparently, he did. I'd told him what I could do for him, and we'd really finished. I asked him to excuse me for a few minutes as I wanted to hear the end of a dramatic critique on the radio. At six, when Menceman came in—you saw him just now—I began to introduce them, when Menceman told me Wain wasn't here."

Karslake noted a half-smoked cigarette on the ashtray by his side: nothing in the tray within Swilbey's reach. That allied with what Swilbey was saying.

"He left the room, then, but not the house," said Karslake.

"He wouldn't wander about my house without permission," asserted Swilbey. "It's much more likely that he heard Menceman arrive and thought it was you coming to collect him. He was in a very nervy state."

"If he left the house—without his hat and coat—which way did he go?" pressed Karslake.

Swilbey had seen that question coming—had seen, too, that he was in no danger, provided he did not shirk the logic of his position.

"He could have got into the garden by going through the door at the back of my rehearsal stage, and along the corridor. That door was locked on this side. If he slipped out that way, it must be unlocked now."

"Can I have a look at the door?"

Swilbey stood up.

"Come with me," he invited. "The stage is in this room—round the corner."

Karslake followed Swilbey round the corner of the "L." A corpse, as such, could not shake Karslake's nerve. But his nerve was shaken this time, partly because he thought, for a second or two, that the corpse was a stage property.

Looking some thirty feet down the short arm of the "L," he saw a well-lit stage-set of a saloon bar. Left back, at an angle, was the bar,

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with shining pump handles; left, a pin-table; right, a bench in green plush; and centre, a human form suspended by its neck in what appeared to be a noose attached to the hook of a pulley block.

Two paces nearer he recognized the features of Turley Wain.

"What?" Swilbey stopped in his stride. "Did you speak?"

"No. It's all right." Karslake was thinking quickly. "Carry on, please, Mr. Swilbey."

Swilbey, a couple of feet ahead, walked on. With the steadiness of a sighted man, he stepped onto the stage. He passed within a dozen inches of the man who was obviously dead. So to the back of the miniature stage.

"Nothing doing!" exclaimed Swilbey. "The door is still locked on this side."

Fascinated, Karslake watched Swilbey return, wondering whether, this time, he would collide with the dangling corpse. Again there were a dozen inches to spare. Perhaps, he reflected, the blind always walked in the same track in familiar surroundings.

"Surely it isn't worth investigating, Karslake! The charge against him is pretty certain to be dropped, after restitution. Forget it for a few minutes and have a drink."

"That sounds like a good idea," said Karslake, who had meantime satisfied himself that there was no hope of saving life.

Back with the blind man, round the corner of the "L" to his chair. Swilbey sat down. Sitting gave him the range of all the gadgets. He leaned forward and opened the door of a cabinet.

"Whiskey, gin, or—"

"Whiskey, please." Karslake glanced uneasily at a row of decanters. "Allow me!"

"It's all right, thanks. You sit down." Swilbey's voice had a slight edge to it. He passed his guest the whiskey decanter, a tumbler, and a siphon, then held out his hand for the return of the decanter.

"Can I pour yours for you, Mr. Swilbey?"

"No thanks!" Swilbey's tone barely escaped rudeness.

Karslake watched Swilbey pour his own drink with a deftness that made his hands seem like independent agents, able to think and act for themselves. Meantime, he was groping for a line of action. That corpse, actually in the same room with them, presented a tricky problem in presence of mind.

"Cigarette, Karslake?"

"Oh—er—thanks!"

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Swilbey thrust his hand into his breast pocket for his cigarette case—kept it there for seconds as if his arm were paralyzed. Then he tried his side pockets.

Karslake saw a thin, tessellated gold cigarette case on the ledge, flush with the dictaphone. But he had observed that Swilbey was very touchy about being helped. So Karslake said nothing.

"Dammit, I thought I had my case on me!"

Karslake was glad of the respite. His mind on the corpse, he watched Swilbey's hand creeping, spiderlike, along the ledge by the dictaphone.

"Ah, here it is!"

For an instant the hand hovered, quivering over the case as if it were puzzled. Karslake dismissed this eerie fancy, took the offered cigarette, and made his decision.

"To come back to Wain for a moment," said Karslake, "you might tell me exactly what happened while he was here."

This was the cue for the scene in which the police were "hopelessly baffled."

He had but to repeat the oft-repeated words.

"It was about five-thirty when he came. I was in the rehearsal theatre. I showed him the tackle for shifting the heavier pieces. Then we came back here and talked. He told me he had committed a technical breach of the criminal law and that he was playing tag with you. Mentioned you by name and said you remembered me. I said I'd let him have the five thousand in the morning. Then he explained that he would be in for a civil bankruptcy to the tune of fifty thousand pounds. I said bluntly I couldn't manage that much—after which things became mildly unpleasant."

"What sort of unpleasantness?"

"After I'd turned down the fifty thousand idea, he said something about the five thousand being wasted—that it would be cheaper for all if he jumped off Waterloo Bridge on a dark night—the usual suicide threat that is never implemented. Between ourselves, Karslake, I don't like that man. He financed my first play. I admit he was thundering useful to me at the time, and I'm glad to let him have the five thousand. Fifty thousand is another pair o' shoes. So I made the excuse that I had to listen to the radio critique. And I suppose he buzzed off in a huff as well as a panic.

"He's coming here tomorrow morning for the five thousand, and he's sure to surrender to you as soon as he's got it, so you don't have to worry. Have another drink?"

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"No thanks. May I use your telephone?"

Karslake dialed the Yard, asked for an internal number.

"Homicide!" said Karslake. "I'll be here when the team arrives." He gave Swilbey's address and hung up."Wain is on that stage of yours, Mr. Swilbey—with his neck in that scene-shifting tackle."

"My God! Doing it in my house!" exclaimed Swilbey. "That's a dirty, malicious trick, Karslake! The publicity will do me no good—no darned good at all."

It was near the truth to say that Robert Swilbey was disappointed when it appeared that the police were not "baffled"—that they hadn't the wit to see that there was anything to be baffled about. On the other hand, he received, in the Coroner's court, a severe shock which put him momentarily in fear of his life. For the Coroner described exactly how Wain had been murdered—which Swilbey had thought no one could ever guess.

"Accident," said the Coroner to his jury, when all the evidence had been heard, "may be ruled out. If you are to return a positive verdict, therefore, you must decide between murder and suicide. Let us consider what evidence, if any, supports the theory of murder."

He dwelt on the virtual impossibility of anyone entering the drawing room without the servants or Swilbey being aware of it—he elaborated obvious absurdities.

"Apart from such absurdities, you have to postulate—to sustain the hypothesis of murder—a very powerful man who suddenly attacked the deceased, constricting his victim's throat so that he could not cry out—or the servants, to say nothing of Mr. Swilbey, would have heard him. For this purpose he used a curtain cord, an item in the fittings of the stage set. This hypothetical murderer then proceeded, in the clumsiest possible manner, to attach his victim to the hook on the pulley block.

"As you have been told, the device of a noose, or slip-knot, was not employed. A curtain cord, itself a stage set, was wound round the throat of the deceased in such a manner as to make four complete coils. This cord was tied at the back of deceased's neck with three knots—the kind of simple knot one uses for one's shoe laces, the difference being that this simple knot was tied three times instead of once. Through three of the coils, the hook beneath the pulley block was inserted, greatly increasing the pressure of the coils round the neck. The hands were unbound. Medical evidence as to the condition of the hands—and microscopic examination of the ropes above

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the pulley block—make it clear that the unhappy man attempted to free himself by reaching above his head and pulling on the ropes.

"Why did our hypothetical murderer permit this attempt to frustrate his purpose? Add that this eccentric murderer must have swung the dead, or unconscious, body in such a way that the shoes could be pressed into the upholstery of the bench—and you may come to the conclusion that no such person as the murderer existed."

The Coroner had reconstructed the murder in order to ridicule the theory of murder. As a dramatist, Swilbey knew the danger of playing tricks like that on an audience, who would sometimes pick up an unexpected angle. But the fact of his blindness—above all, Karslake's evidence of his behavior in the presence of the corpse—headed off suspicion.

Swilbey's dread was dispelled when the Coroner went on to say what Swilbey had intended him to say.

"On the hypothesis of suicide the deceased slipped silently away when Mr. Swilbey turned on the radio. After adjusting the pulley to the height he required, he wound the curtain cord round his throat, as one might wind a narrow scarf, and tied it, as described, at the back. He stood on the bench, worked the hook under the coils, then swung himself off the bench. Police measurements, on the chart before you, show that the ropes would then swing, pendulum-wise, to the centre of the stage, bringing the feet of the deceased within three and a half inches of the floor.

"Like many a suicide and would-be suicide before him, he repented of his act before it had been completed, and tried to interrupt it. Had he secured himself with a noose, he would in all probability have succeeded. To free the hook from the coils of curtain cord was a great deal more difficult than loosening a slip-knot—doubly so, through the fact that his jaw was large and prominent."

The jury, ever ready to believe that a simple explanation must be the true one, accepted the Coroner's interpretation. Only Chief Inspector Karslake was heard to mumble that the suicide had been clearheaded enough to measure the pendulum swing, correct to three and a half inches. After a verdict of suicide while of unsound mind, public interest in the case evaporated.

On the evening following the inquest, Robert Swilbey resumed work on the first act of *Playgirl Wanted,* abandoned two years previously. The play was put on the following autumn. It ran all through the following year.

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Eighteen months later he was at work on another play—when the end came.

A junior detective from another department flung open the door of the Department of Dead Ends and ushered in a seedy individual with patched trousers but a very decent sports coat.

"This is Mr. Joe Byker, sir," said the detective facetiously. "Hensons', the pawnbrokers, phoned us. Mr. Byker was trying to pawn this." He laid on the table a slim gold cigarette case with a tessellated design. "Mr. Byker said the case is his and he bought it with his own money."

Among the burglaries, petty thefts, and whatnot on Detective-Inspector Rason's file were eleven missing gold cigarette cases, five with tessellated design. He opened the case in the hope of finding some identifying mark.

For Remembrance, he read. No name. No initials.

"You bought it, eh, Byker! From a man in a pub whose name you don't know?"

"No, sir. I bought it right enough, a matter o' six weeks ago, off a respectable dealer name o' Clawsons, Theobalds Road."

"They're second-hand clothes dealers, Byker."

"That's right, sir. Matter o' six weeks ago I bought this 'ere sports coat as I'm wearin' this very minute, sir, and I didn't know till this morning when I was havin' me breakfast that I'd bought that cigarette case with it. In here it was, sir." He took the coat off. "In between these two bits o' stuffing—that's where I had to cut the lining to get it out. And me walking about with it for a matter o' six weeks."

Clawson, the dealer, was able to supply the name and address of the man from whom he had bought the sports coat. Interviewed by Rason, the vendor of the coat was inclined to be indignant.

"Yes, I sold it to Clawson's—and what's the matter with that? The missus gave it to me to do what I liked with."

"And who is the missus?"

"Mrs. Swilbey—wife of the gentleman who writes all them plays. I'm his gardener."

Swilbey, writer of plays! In a few minutes Rason remembered the freak suicide of eighteen months ago. Byker would drop in for "stealing by finding" if Mrs. Swilbey would consent to prosecute, he reflected on his way to the house in St. John's Wood.

"Perhaps you could tell me, Mrs. Swilbey, whether this is your husband's cigarette case?"

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"It looks like it. I wonder where he dropped it!"

Mildred took the case, opened it, and caught her breath.

"No," she said. "It is not my husband's."

"But you do know whose it is, Mrs. Swilbey!" It was a statement, not a question.

"It belonged to a friend of ours who—is dead. A Mr. Wain. I gave it to him myself. It is exactly like the one I gave to my husband—bought at the same place. That's why I thought at first it was his."

"Mr. Wain," repeated Rason. "I remember. Very sad. You're sure this is the case you gave Mr. Wain?"

"Quite!" She added the name of the jeweler where she had bought both cases. "How did it come into your hands, Mr. Rason?"

"It has been stolen," answered Rason, and bowed himself out.

He checked up at the jeweler's, then decided reluctantly that he must bring Chief Inspector Karslake into it.

"He was a lawyer once," warned Karslake, as it was Rason's case. "You won't get him to admit anything. But I'll stooge you all I can."

At five-thirty that afternoon they were being shown into the L-shaped drawing room. Karslake introduced Rason with a somewhat elaborate heartiness.

"I've got to worry you about the estate in bankruptcy of the late Turley Wain, Mr. Swilbey," cut in Karslake, "d'you mind if we smoke?"

"Do! Here, have a cigarette!" Swilbey felt in one pocket and then another, then found his cigarette case on the ledge that was flush with the dictaphone. "I don't know anything about Wain's affairs."

Rason observed the cigarette case. It looked exactly like Wain's—the same tessellated design. It would feel the same to a blind man—and that was all Rason wanted to know.

"What an extraordinary thing!" exclaimed Rason. "That case is exactly like Turley Wain's." He added carefully, "You may remember—it dropped out of Wain's pocket—onto the floor of your stage—during the poor chap's struggles."

There was a tiny perceptible stiffening of the large frame. But it was the long pause that made Rason sure of his ground.

"I don't remember, because I was never told," said Swilbey.

"You didn't need telling! You picked the cigarette case up after you had killed him. You thought it was yours, because it feels the same. And you put it in your pocket. It was in your pocket when you were sitting here, offering Mr. Karslake a cigarette."

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"Any ass can make wild assertions!" snapped Swilbey. "Are you in this foolery, Karslake?"

"Well, Mr. Swilbey, I must say I do remember your offering me a cigarette out of a gold case."

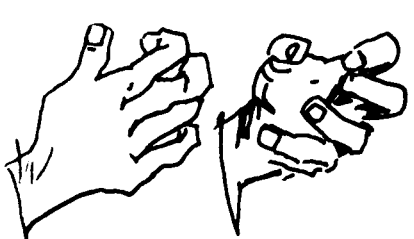
"Then I wonder, my dear Karslake—" Swilbey had pounced as, years ago, he would pounce on a witness "—I wonder whether you also remember that the case was *not* in my pocket, as I thought it was, but on this ledge here?"

"Y—yes, I do remember, now you mention it, Mr. Swilbey." Karslake spoke as one making a reluctant admission. "Rason, I think you'll have to apologize."

"Wait a minute!" said Rason. "*Suppose* the case on the ledge there, out of which he offered you a cigarette, was his own case? And *suppose* Wain's case, which Swilbey had put in his pocket, had slipped down the lining. And *suppose*—"

"Suppose my grandmother's foot!" Swilbey emitted a roar of laughter. "Karslake, haven't you taught this man any evidence?" Swilbey leaned forward in the direction of Rason. "My good man! If you could prove that I put Wain's cigarette case in my pocket—eighteen months ago, mark you!—we would not be talking about it. Mr. Karslake would charge me with murder—wouldn't you, Karslake?"

"Yes," said Chief Inspector Karslake. In sudden silence the distant rumble of traffic seemed to fill the vast drawing room. Presently Karslake added: "Perhaps you'd like to ring the bell, Swilbey, and tell them to pack you a suitcase?"



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a ***NEW*** short story by

DONALD OLSON

Unfamiliar towns can alter one's self-image, like wearing a stranger's clothes. I had as little sense of my own identity as did the cat who stole out of the shadows, froze momentarily, and then streaked across my path and up the dark alley. Was he as homeless as I, no longer warmed by a feeling of belonging to a particular place or a particular person? Certainly I felt no sense of homecoming as I climbed the stairs in the rooming house, entered the dark room, and stood at the window looking out over the city . . .

SOMEWHITHER COLD AND STRANGE

by DONALD OLSON

"Mister, you could write a book as long as the Bible about the dumb mistakes I've made in my life," declared Floy Dugan one night when I was the last remaining patron in her bar and not eager to return to the cheerless rooming house where I was staying.

"Couldn't we all?" I replied, nursing my beer and suspecting Floy's mistakes had most likely been the result of unwise investments of the heart. Not that she looked emotionally battered, far from it. Blonde and plump, she was by no means unattractive in her middle age, but with a certain overeagerness to please in her manner, the sort of incautious willingness to trust that too often leads to betrayal.

Although it was six months ago, I remember that night at Dugan's as if it were yesterday—when perhaps it was only the lateness of the hour or the steady rain coming down outside that inspired Floy's confessional mood. Or was it because she regarded what I'd told

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her about myself as endowing me with the special insight certain professions are assumed to possess? Tell people that you're a writer and the response is usually the same: "Man, I could give you *plenty* to write about—all I'd have to do is tell you the story of my life." And with very little encouragement, they often do—especially in bars.

I like to think of bars like Dugan's as little Islands of the Lost where the castaways of life huddle together as if to share the warmth of a bonfire no rescue ship will ever spot. It stood at the end of Crescent Street, just down the alley from the bank on Main Street which at that time was threatening to foreclose on Floy's property. If not exactly Skid Row, Crescent Street had become one of those urban-slide areas where the buildings seem to cling desperately to the crumbling edge of respectability, their prospects of survival as shaky as their foundations.

Dugan's Bar would surely have gone under years ago, along with Dugan himself, had not his widow Florence—everyone called her Floy—shrewdly acquired the lease of the adjoining secondhand store and turned it into a laundromat, with a door at the rear cut through into the bar. Floy had reasoned that the neighborhood, mostly rooming houses, needed a laundromat and that its patrons would rather spend their time in the cozy comfort of the bar while waiting for their laundry to be done than in leafing through ancient magazines in the laundromat.

Unfortunately, Floy had been less shrewd in assessing the condition of the washers and dryers she'd picked up for a song from a defunct establishment on the north side. It was to this she was referring, rather than to any romantic misadventures, that night in Dugan's.

"I was sold a bill of goods. The cost of servicing them rattletrap machines was eating up all my profits, such as they were. Until God in His mercy sent me Calvin Truver. Here, this one's on the house if you don't mind my bending your ear."

She refilled my glass, and as she told me about Calvin a warmth entered her voice which led me to suspect there might after all be a romantic side to the story. She told me about the calamitous afternoon when three of the machines had broken down at the same time and the repairman was unavailable. Poor Floy had been on the verge of tears when a little man had spoken up from the end of the bar: "Better let me have a go at 'em."

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Knowing the rosy false confidence liquor too often inspired in her customers, Floy had smiled uncertainly. "That's real sweet of you, I'm sure, but I don't think—"

"Can't do more damage than that so-called repairman of yours."

To Floy's delight, Calvin had soon had those machines working like well-oiled clocks that had never before told the right time—all but one, that is. "That bugger's permanently out of whack," said Calvin. "You might's well leave the out-of-order sign on it till you can replace it." In other words, forever.

Calvin Truver had proved a far better deal than those machines. In return for servicing them and in helping out in other ways, Floy had offered him the room upstairs rent-free, along with two meals a day. Having recognized a borderline alcoholic, she had enjoyed the additional satisfaction of having rescued a fellow soul from that liquefactious pit down which more than a few of her customers had vanished over the years.

"Now there's a story for a writer," beamed Floy. "That little runt's had a tragic life. He was a woodsman, born and bred. Can tell you more about trees than you'd want to know. Had his own tree-service business down south of here. Had a wife and little girl. Then when business was almost too good, he made the mistake of missing a payment on his liability insurance. There was an accident. Calvin was injured and his helper killed. They sued the pants off him. He lost everything. Then his wife left him and he started drifting and hit the bottle."

"And you saved him," I said.

Floy shrugged modestly. "Me? Heck, all I did was give him a chance to get back on his feet. But why kid myself? One of these days he'll up and leave. All he dreams about is getting back to the trees. If he had a dime in his pocket he'd take off today. You'll see, it won't be long. He's been acting funny lately."

"Funny?"

"Moody. Cross. I know he feels trapped. It worries me, what he might take it into his head to do. I say to him, 'Calvin, come home with me. I'll fix you a nice pot roast. We'll watch TV.' But he's always got an excuse." She uttered a girlish laugh. "Scared of falling into another trap, I guess. Can't blame him none, after the number that wife of his done on him. Oh, look at the time—I better haul my freight out of here."

I said good-night and walked back to my rooming house through empty streets under an ice-colored moon. The rain had stopped.

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Unfamiliar towns can alter one's self-image, like wearing a stranger's clothes. I had as little sense of my own identity as did the cat who stole out of the shadows, froze momentarily, and then streaked across my path and up the dark alley. Was he as homeless as I, no longer warmed by a feeling of belonging to a particular place or a particular person? Certainly I felt no sense of homecoming as I climbed the stairs in the rooming house, entered the dark room, and stood at the window looking out over the city.

I thought of Andy, dead now these two months, the only really close friend I'd ever had. He'd escaped as a young man from this very town which had represented everything alien to his poetic, freewheeling spirit. He had an incurably restless nature and tended to grow edgy if we stayed too long in one place. I remembered the last time we were in Florida—when Andy, bored with the sun and inactivity, had looked at me and quoted a line from one of his favorite poems, " 'Let us go hence, somewhither cold and strange,' " and in an hour we were packed and on our way north. A creature of opposites was old Andy, and but for him I wouldn't have been in this town. Somehow I'd felt obliged, after his death, to follow through on our plans to come here. Call it a sort of defiant last tribute to his memory and the times we'd shared.

I turned on the light and studied my notes. Mine was a lonely vocation, and that night I felt more alone than ever. But I was a craftsman and I knew that even if I wanted to, it was too late to adopt another calling. I had neither the training nor the aptitude for any other line of endeavor.

Faintly grotesque rather than ugly would be a not unfair description of Calvin Truver's features. Ugliness affords no pleasure to the eye, whereas in Calvin's monkeylike face, with its deep-set clear brown eyes, there was a look of shy and attractive homeliness I could understand appealing to a woman like Floy Dugan. There was something monkeylike as well in his slightly built but tough and sinewy body. One could picture him scampering nimbly along the branch of a tall tree with his chain saw.

While reading my book as I waited for my laundry to dry, I observed Calvin as he tinkered with one of the machines. It was early in the morning and the adjoining bar was still closed. Floy wouldn't arrive for another hour.

I made a remark about it being an endless job he'd undertaken. Calvin wiped a smear of grease from his elbow and with a shy glance

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in my direction said, "They're all junk—none of 'em's much better than that baby," indicating with a nod the end machine with its permanent Out-of-Order sign.

I said that all machines were a mystery to me and that I envied guys who could take them apart and put them back together. Calvin shrugged. "There are things I'd rather be doing."

It was the first time we'd exchanged more than a couple of words. "Like tree work, you mean. Floy told me about that."

"You must be the scribbler." He glanced at the book in my hand, seeing it perhaps as no more than the end-product of a tree. "Shouldn't guess there'd be much to write about in this town."

"You'd be surprised what a wealth of material can be found in a place like this."

"If you say so," he muttered, looking out into the street with eyes blind to its enchantments. "Me, I'd hightail it out of here tomorrow if I wasn't skint."

"Floy would be sorry to lose you," I said, wondering if he was equally blind to the Widow Dugan's wistful, romantic ambitions.

"Floy's all right. Been damn good to me. Pity a big heart don't cut any ice with them greedy bastards up there." He made a rude gesture toward the bank's gleaming dome just visible at the top of the alley. "Hell of a note when you put all you got into a place and then get screwed out of it by a bunch of hard-nosed bankers."

The dryer stopped. I got up to unload it. Calvin returned to his labors. Unalike as we were, I sensed a kind of spiritual rapport between us, as if we both had a clear vision of our destinies, the difference being that Calvin Truver was still intent on pursuing his while I was trying to escape from mine, or thought I was. Time would decide if it was too late for us both.

My daily walk usually ended up at the Golden Griddle on Main Street, where I'd linger over endless cups of coffee at a table by the window, studying the street scene as if soaking up the details to be later used in some fictional epic. I recorded as with a camera's eye the passersby on the sidewalk as they went in and out of the barbershop, the bank, the newsroom, and drugstore until I left the coffee shop, picked up a paper, and walked down the alley to Dugan's on Crescent, where I'd spend an hour or so nursing a beer, scanning the paper, and chatting with Floy.

"He's up to something," she announced gravely one afternoon when business was more than usually dead.

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"You mean Calvin?"

"Something's on his mind. Something he won't talk about."

"How can you tell?"

"He's been acting jumpy."

"We all get that way at times."

"That's not all." She glanced down the bar to where the only other customer sat hunched over his glass, his glazed eyes fixed on a game show noisily brightening the TV screen. "He's never made a fuss about my popping up to tidy his room now and then, but now he's started locking the door. He never did that before. Well, so happens I've got an extra key. When he was out this morning, I went up there. Okay, so I snooped a bit. Well, you know, I thought maybe he had socks needed darning or something. Guess what I found in his bottom drawer?"

"Dirty pictures?"

She made a face. "A gun!"

My lack of astonishment seemed to pain her. "I mean a real *gun*. Not a toy!"

"What sort of gun?"

"How do I know? A handgun. What's he doing with a gun?"

"Come on, Floy, don't tell me you think little Calvin's turned into a bandit who goes out nights robbing people. That sort of thing doesn't happen in this town. You'd hear about it if it did."

She found my attitude infuriating. "Calvin may be little, but he's tough. And desperate. How do you know what a guy might do if he gets desperate?"

"He may be frustrated, but hardly desperate."

My attempt to downplay her concern seemed only to aggravate it. "Okay, maybe it's not that," she conceded. "Maybe it's something worse."

"Like what?"

She lowered her voice to a tragic whisper. "He's more than once said to me he'd rather be stone-cold dead than trapped in this town."

"Oh, that. He said the same thing to me the other day, but that doesn't mean he's thinking of blowing his brains out."

"Then why the gun?"

"Why don't you ask him?"

She sniffed. "And let him know I've been snooping in his stuff?"

"Look, Floy—if you're that worried, what other choice do you have?"

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She twisted the cloth with which she'd been wiping the bar. "I wouldn't say this to another soul, but I can talk to you. I admit it, I've got a soft spot for the guy. I haven't felt like this about another man since Dugan and never expected to. So maybe I'm just a lonely widow who needs somebody to care about. Tell me I'm nuts, but I won't rest till that gun disappears. Now suppose someone was to fake a break-in. Bars do get burglarized. Suppose it was made to look like someone broke in and rifled the register, stole some booze, ransacked Calvin's room, and made off with the gun?"

I tried to keep a straight face. "No offense, Floy, but that's a really dumb idea. Forget it."

"What's so dumb about it?" she demanded.

"Floy, if a guy wanted to bump himself off, there's more than one way to do it. Swiping that gun isn't going to stop him if that's what he's planning—which I'm damn sure he isn't."

"Then for God's sake tell me what to do."

"I already did. Talk to the guy. Tell him how you feel. Maybe that's what he needs, to know somebody cares about him. Make your pitch. What can you lose?"

For an attractive woman, she clearly had little confidence in her own resources. "Maybe I'm too scared of making another dumb mistake. Sometimes I feel like I'm at the end of my tether and what's the use of going on. I had another letter from that snotty bloodsucker at the bank. If I lose this place—and I'm going to, it's in the cards—I'll have nothing. I know I'm an old fool, but I liked to think maybe Calvin and me— Well, you know, we're both alone in the world."

What could I do but repeat my advice: "Go home and sleep on it, Floy. First chance you get tomorrow morning, march right up to Calvin and tell him what's in your heart. As I say, what can you lose?"

She ventured an uneasy, woebegone smile. "You really think I should?"

"Damn right I do. Show a little spunk. You think I want to leave town Friday and not know how the story ends?"

"Friday? You're leaving Friday?"

"I plan to, yes."

"Gee, I'm sorry to hear that—I really am." I could tell she meant it and was flattered she'd trusted me enough to choose me as her confidant. But when she asked where I was planning to go, I told her I hadn't quite made up my mind.

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Which wasn't altogether true. Perhaps Andy's death had awakened a sense of my own mortality, but, added to a growing fear that I'd somehow lost my edge and was close to burning out, it seemed wise to get away from everything for a while, rest somewhere in the sun, and consider my options for the future. I should have enough money to spend the winter in Mexico, which was at least the direction in which Andy and I planned to travel. In his wanderings before we teamed up, he'd spent some time down there and his lyrical descriptions of the country had fired my imagination.

There was a travel bureau next door to the bank, and on my way to the Golden Griddle I stopped and collected a handful of flashy brochures and a few maps that I examined over my coffee. Presently a couple of cops sauntered into the coffee shop and parked at a nearby table, gazing out at the street with identical bored expressions, reminding me of what Andy had said about nothing ever happening in this town. The sight of their holstered firearms got me to thinking about Floy and Calvin and that gun in the bottom drawer. I really did believe its discovery had needlessly alarmed Floy. Calvin had probably owned it for years and, once owned, it's not the sort of thing one usually discards.

Friday morning I slept late, waking to one of those dreary late-autumn days of perpetual twilight—mist and rain obscuring the view from my window, one of those days when it would be dark by five o'clock. I shaved and showered and reviewed my day's agenda—the last day, praise God, I'd have to spend in this depressing town. All the stores and business places stayed open till six on Fridays, so I knew there was no rush about picking up what I'd need for my journey. I spent the rest of the morning writing a few letters, went out for a late lunch at the Golden Griddle, and stopped for a drink at Dugan's to take the chill off my bones.

Floy's smile betrayed no shadow of that earlier anxiety. "You're still here, then," she said, mixing my drink.

"Till this evening. I'll be in later to do some laundry and say goodbye. Where's Calvin?"

She gave me a look now of amused complacency. "Upstairs in bed. He hasn't been getting much sleep lately, that's why he's been so grumpy. Sly little bugger, you know what he's been doing?"

"Neither mischief nor mayhem, I take it."

"I talked to him like you said. Guess what? For the past two weeks, he's been working nights as a guard at a furniture factory on the east side. Wasn't going to say a word until he was sure he

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could hack it. You know how he hates inside work."

"An *armed* guard?"

"Got to be armed. It's a rough area and there's been trouble lately."

"He told you this when you asked about the gun?"

"He *was* a bit cross with me—called me an old busybody. But between you and me, I think he was pleased to know I worried about him."

"And you believed his story?"

Her eyes flashed. "Why not? Calvin wouldn't lie to me."

"Sorry. It's just that I think you're a little too quick to take people at face value. I wouldn't want you to get hurt."

Her manner softened. "Yeah, maybe you're right. Lord knows I've swallowed more tall tales in this joint than you could put on paper in a lifetime. But I know I'm not wrong about Calvin." She ducked her head toward me and winked. "With the peanuts that job pays, it'll take him a lot longer than a month of Sundays to squirrel away enough to get back to his precious trees. By that time, who knows?" And she gave her freshly brightened gold ringlets a self-satisfied pat.

Reluctant to leave the warm coziness of the bar, I nearly dawdled too long before making my way up the alley to Main Street. I got to the drugstore and bank just before closing time, after mailing my letters at the post office and buying a flight bag at the department store.

That evening I left the rooming house for the last time and, with a strong sense of Andy's ghostly presence beside me, toted my duffel bag to the laundromat, stuffed a few garments in a washer, dropped some quarters in the slot, and entered the bar, which was filled with the usual Friday night crowd.

Just inside the door, I came upon Calvin sitting alone in the corner booth. He made a sign for me to join him. "Floy tells me you're taking off."

"Soon as my laundry's done, I'm calling a cab to take me to the airport."

"Was it worth the visit?" he asked, with a grin that presumed to answer his own question.

"I'm not sorry I came."

"Nor sorry to leave, I bet."

"Cheer up, Calvin, you won't be stuck here forever."

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"You mean I haven't been?"

"Floy told me you've taken a job nights. I'm glad you'll be around for a while. For Floy's sake."

He glanced toward the bar. "Hell of a woman, Floy."

"You had her worried, you know." I crooked my finger and aimed an imaginary pistol at him. He grinned sheepishly but with a glint of wicked amusement in his monkey eyes. "She tell you about that, too?"

Before I could answer, I became aware of a sudden stillness falling upon the bar. I glanced toward Floy, and in the mirror behind her caught the reflection of a flashing red light from out in the street. Turning my head, I saw the two cops standing just inside the front door. All eyes followed them as they advanced.

Moving swiftly, Floy slipped from behind the bar and approached the booth where we sat. Whatever she had in mind, it was as if she hoped to shield Calvin from the cops' view.

But even before they reached us, I knew it wasn't Calvin they'd come for.

Andy had been right about that bank. It was a pushover, and maybe if he'd been with me as we'd planned there wouldn't have been any slip-up. Not that the job itself hadn't gone smoothly—nor could even Andy, the old pro, have faulted the care and diligence with which I'd cased the job and planned my every move. Before the first alarm had sounded, I'd made my getaway down the dark alley, across the street, and into the laundromat, which I'd felt safe in assuming would be empty at that time of day.

Call it bad luck. Who would have dreamed that one of those lazy cops in that town where nothing ever happened would have spotted me in the Golden Griddle the day before I pulled the job, decided there was something familiar about my face, and checked through some old "wanted" flyers? Or that one of his buddies, having been alerted, would have caught sight of me as I ambled along Crescent on the way to Dugan's?

One thing I do know, they never recovered the loot. Which can mean only one thing or I'd have heard about it. I suppose there's a chance that that flight bag full of cash, along with the cap and dark glasses I wore, might still be hidden in the out-of-order washer where I'd stashed them after pulling the job, intending to recover the bag just before leaving town. But having received that brief letter from Floy yesterday, there's little doubt in my mind that she

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got my message when I wrote to her after being up here a month: "Tell Calvin there's nothing out of order next door."

Floy Dugan's as honest a woman as ever breathed, I'd bet my bottom dollar on that, but let's face it, there was no love lost between her and that bank. More than once she'd said they were no better than crooks.

With all this time on my hands, maybe I'll buckle down and try my hand at being the writer I always pretended to be. Now that I know the end of the story, I'd like to write about Calvin and Floy. What she wrote in that letter was more generous than I deserved. And although it gave nothing away, didn't the snapshot say it all?

It looks down at me from the wall of my cell as I write.

Floy and Calvin standing in front of a truck piled high with branches. Arms entwined, they're both smiling.

DETECTIVERSE

STRINGS ATTACHED

by M. E. COBB

The elegant blonde in the corner
Caught his eye as he entered the bar.
The rhythm that flowed from the bandstand
Was laid down by a hot bass guitar.

The rhythm that flowed deep inside him
Led him on to attempting a pass.
With a wave he instructed the barkeep
To freshen the drink in her glass.

Then just when he thought he'd struck paydirt
A guitar struck him square in the face.
It seems that the blonde was the girlfriend
Of the guy who was playing the bass.

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a *NEW* John Francis Cuddy story by

JEREMIAH HEALY

"What makes you think your friend was killed?"

"It's just too pat. If any one of the children is the killer, none inherit. They all hated Joe, with some justification. He really was quite a miserable man in many ways, and a difficult father at best. They rarely visited him in the home, and the only time they were all there together was his birthday."

"So the only time they all had equal opportunity was the one day he happens to die."

"Correct. Thereby giving each of them the argument of reasonable doubt without any of them being the only one needing an alibi . . ."

Jeremiah Healy's popular P. I. John Francis Cuddy has featured in several novels, the most recent of which, Right to Die, *was published by Pocket Books last June.*

CROSSED WIRES

by JEREMIAH HEALY

"I used to have a corner office, Mr. Cuddy, but once I went 'Of Counsel', I was relegated to this broom closet."

A senior lawyer like Stanton Wilcox might think of the twelve-by-fifteen-foot room with a pie-slice view of Boston Harbor as a broom closet, but it probably beat my private investigator space by twenty square feet. Wilcox himself was pushing eighty, a compact man in a glen-plaid suit and hand-done bow tie. Widow's peak of white hair combed straight back, bushy white eyebrows over hawk eyes, pug nose and determined jaw. He looked like a man who believed in precise aggression.

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Wilcox had already motioned me to the captain's chair in front of his teak desk, taking the judge's chair behind it himself. There was nothing between us on the desk except a layer of lemon-scented polish.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Wilcox, but I'd be interested to know how you found me."

"Understandable. Michael O'Dell once worked for this firm. He commended you for your discretion."

I'd done a job for O'Dell involving a small, family-held corporation he represented. Looking to the closed door behind me, I said, "A firm this size doesn't have its own agency on retainer?"

Wilcox nodded, one sharp dip of the chin. "Michael also mentioned your . . . acumen."

I waited.

The old man came forward in his chair, elbows on the desk like a bouncer getting ready for arm wrestling. "This is personal."

"Personal to you."

"Yes."

I took out a pad and a pen. "Go ahead."

Wilcox closed his eyes, then opened them and seemed not to blink for the next few minutes. "I believe a friend of mine has been murdered."

"Save yourself some money. Dial nine-one-one."

The lawyer's expression said he wasn't used to hearing debate from the chair in front of him. "Let me be more . . . elaborate, then. A friend of mine from the war named Joseph Luntayne died under suspicious circumstances."

"What circumstances?"

"He was in a nursing home and died of an apparent heart attack."

"And you find that suspicious?"

"Joe had a stroke eighteen months ago. He needed a cane, sometimes a wheelchair, but not often. There was nothing wrong with his heart."

"A doctor told you that?"

"His treating physician and the pathologist."

"There was an autopsy, then."

"Yes. I ordered it."

"Ordered it?"

"As Joe's executor. At least for now."

I stopped writing notes. "I don't get you."

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Wilcox clasped his hands, resting his chin on them. "Joe and I were in the OSS together. Before your time, but—"

"The Office of Strategic Services."

The sharp nod, which almost cracked his knuckles, then a relaxing of the formal manner. "We were teamed. Dropped into France a few months before D-Day. Worked with the French on German troop locations, resupply points." Wilcox leaned back in his chair, seeming to drift back as well. "Huddled in some broken-down manger, manure pile for a table, me watching for grey uniforms while Joe hunched over the radio, transmitting back to . . ."

The commando-spy returned to the present, shaking his head. "In any case, we'd known each other fifty years. After the stroke, Joe had to enter a nursing home. He had plenty of money, but he could see his children eying it, watching it shrink."

"From the nursing home bills."

"Five thousand a month."

"You're kidding?"

"No. And that's just room and board."

"Wife?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Is your friend's wife still alive, too?"

"Oh. No, Emily passed away ten years ago."

"How old was your friend?"

"Seventy-seven. He died on his birthday."

I took some more notes. "So his children are what, in their forties?"

"Correct. Walter's the oldest, a sort of ne'er-do-well. Descended from high school teacher to insurance agent to postal worker. Anne's the middle one, a veterinarian. And a spinster, too, though I'm not sure she cares. Philip is the youngest. A pharmacist, which I always thought was a rather alliterative profession for him to pursue."

"And they were all interested in Luntayne's money."

"Yes. Eight months after the stroke, Joe stabilized. It was pretty clear that he was going to survive, probably for a long time."

"Probably till his money ran out."

"That's right. So he had me redraft his will."

"How?"

"To provide that if any one of his children killed him, none of them would inherit."

I rested my pen. "I thought that if somebody committed murder, he or she couldn't inherit from the decedent?"

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"That's right. But this way, Joe insured that his death would be investigated. Joe loved power, Mr. Cuddy. He loved being in control. For example, when we were in France, even though I was the senior man on the team, he would maneuver things so he got to send those messages. That way, he controlled what and how much information our superiors received. Of course, he'd been Signal Corps, so he was better at it than I was."

"What makes you think your friend was killed?"

"It's just too pat. If any one of the children is the killer, none inherit. They all hated Joe, with some justification. He really was quite a miserable man in many ways, and a difficult father at best. They rarely visited him in the home, and the only time they were all there together was his birthday."

"So the only time they all had equal opportunity was the one day he happens to die."

"Correct. Thereby giving each of them the argument of reasonable doubt without any of them being the only one needing an alibi."

"How do you get around the pathologist's saying it was a heart attack?"

"I've spoken to him, and to other doctors I know. They all say it is possible to induce heart attack without much trace using potassium chloride, a relatively available compound."

"You figure they fed it to your friend?"

"No. More likely they injected it. Joe needed a Heparin lock in his arm."

"What's that?"

"I'm not a medical man, but the Heparin is basically a semi-permanent spigot inserted in the arm to receive intravenous solutions. He had one in him that day when I saw him earlier. Someone with a syringe could have simply shot him up through the lock."

"Which would have caused the heart attack."

"Yes. Rather quickly, I'm told."

I thought back to nursing homes I'd visited. "Your friend have a roommate?"

"No. Well, yes, technically, but not really."

"Again?"

"Joe's roommate was . . . a vegetable, I'm afraid. A boy who'd been in some accident. Joe didn't like to be around him any more than necessary. In fact, any time I visited, Joe would insist I walk him down to one of the day rooms or out onto the patio to get away for a while."

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"Why didn't your friend just change roommates?"

"Probably because he found it satisfying to be in control one last time. As I told you, Mr. Cuddy, Joe could be a difficult man."

I started flipping back through my notes. "And you want me to look for evidence that one of his children killed him."

"Exactly."

I found a dangling point. "Before you said you were Luntayne's executor 'at least for now.' "

Wilcox pursed his lips. "Yes?"

"What would make you stop being his executor?"

The old lawyer moved his tongue inside his mouth for a moment. "The will provides that if one of the children did kill Joe, I receive the entire estate as alternative beneficiary."

"At which point, another lawyer as executor would look better?"

"Correct."

"Mr. Wilcox, why did Luntayne bother with that?"

"What?"

"Why did he bother with the 'alternative beneficiary' business? You were his friend, you'd have investigated his death anyway, right?"

Stanton Wilcox just stared at me.

The Pineview Nursing Home was just off Interstate 93 north of Boston. From its semicircular drive, it offered a view of maybe three pines, all stunted and surrounded by stones, as though expecting an attack. The home itself was made of yellow bricks and seemed all on one floor. The main entrance announced itself with two Doric pillars and a front door that didn't require a bell to be pushed.

The small lobby was carpeted and had a felt bulletin board with plastic numbers and letters scheduling the times for each meal and activities like Reflection Period, Limbering Up, and Pet Therapy. The meals accounted for half the entries.

In one corner of the lobby was a counter like a cheap hotel. The fat woman behind it seemed weary beyond her tasks. I identified myself to her.

She groaned and said, "Mrs. Hernandez?"

Another woman, not fat, came across the lobby toward us. In her thirties and attractive, she had long black hair drawn over a shoul-

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der and three-inch high heels. In between, her bright print blouse set off her pleated skirt, and her introductory smile suggested that "Mrs. Hernandez" was glad to see me.

Until I told her why I was there.

Hernandez frowned. "Please come into my office."

We walked behind the counter and stopped at another door, this one needing a buzz-through. The office was cheery, with lots of plants and primary colors. A first-step nursery school rather than a last-stop nursing home.

Hernandez tapped a chair with a long red fingernail, then settled on the edge of her desk. I decided to stay standing instead.

She said, "I really don't see how we can help you, Mr. Cuddy."

"I'm just interested in seeing Mr. Luntayne's room, maybe talking with some of the other patients."

"Residents."

"Sorry?"

"We call our guests 'residents,' Mr. Cuddy. They aren't sick, just old."

"I was under the impression Mr. Luntayne was just old, too, but he died here."

"Of natural causes. A heart attack."

"Should I be calling you *Dr.* Hernandez?"

That almost brought a smile. "No. But it doesn't take a medical degree to understand that older residents, especially when weakened as Joe was, might die of many things."

Joe. "Do you call all your residents by their first names?"

"We try. It makes them feel a little more with it. And with us." She gestured at her blouse and the walls. "We want to make them see that life doesn't have to turn grey just because their hair has. So we paint the walls and dress up a little and run organized, simple activities to keep their attention and help them pass the time a little more productively."

The nursery-school image flashed back. "Mrs. Hernandez, no one is accusing Pineview of anything. You told me your job, let me tell you mine. I look at places and talk to people. I read papers and write things down."

The almost-smile again. "No car chases or gun fights?"

"Just on major holidays."

Hernandez turned something over in her head. "All right. Come with me."

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* * *

The corridor was a good sixty yards in length and straight as an arrow. The lobby carpet was repeated, but the rooms we passed had linoleum floors. Probably easier to clean. As in mop up. Two orderlies in orange shirts were pushing buckets with long handles just visible above the wringers.

Both walls of the corridor had wooden handrails everywhere but the door openings. A few residents made their way along the handrails, Arctic explorers in a blizzard holding onto a lifeline. Others were in wheelchairs, scuffing across the rug with one foot, a slow-motion version of the kids on scooters they once must have been. A very tall man in a cardigan sweater had his pant legs rolled up to half-calf. He moved six inches, then repositioned a four-poster walker and moved six inches more, his shoes never leaving the ground.

The public address system clicked on and off several times, a breathless operator paging various people. As we went by the typically open doors, you could hear snatches of conversation. A Caribbean lilt saying, "Come now, Louise, come, come. Just a little more eggnog?" An Irish brogue, "Oh and he's adorable. Your grandson, you say?" Next to the nurse's station, a Vietnamese singsong, "Anybody know when Charlie voided last?"

We turned a corner and started down an identical corridor. Passing a large, airy room, I saw eight men and women in wheelchairs, arranged in a quarter-moon formation around a large projection TV. Half of them were watching Phil Donahue interview a transvestite. The others were asleep, heads tilted so far forward they would pitch their frail bodies onto the rug but for the restraint masquerading as lunch tray that held each person in his or her chair.

"Mr. Cuddy?"

"Right. Sorry."

We reached the midway point of the second corridor. A loveseat in a quiet alcove provided a rest stop for the residents and probably a refuge for the visitors.

Hernandez said, "Please sit down for a moment. I want to make sure Martin isn't being looked after."

"Martin?"

"He was Joe's roommate."

My guide disappeared behind a door and started talking to someone in a loudish voice. I dropped into the loveseat. Stiffly sprung,

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probably designed for ease of access and egress, not comfort.

Hernandez reopened the door, beckoning me.

A half-bath was visible in one corner. The double room itself was furnished perfectly symmetrically. The metal-framed beds were side by side, a lowboy bureau at the foot of each and a mirror over each bureau. There were complementary landscapes and seascapes covering the rest of the wall space. What I took to be Luntayne's bed was empty.

Hernandez stood over the other bed, the one nearer the window. The bed was raised at forty-five degrees, the crib bars elevated, I assumed to keep its occupant from rolling out.

In the loudish voice, Hernandez said, "Martin, this is Mr. Cuddy." Haloed by the light from the window behind her, she used the back of her right hand to brush the left cheek of the man in the bed.

He was clean-shaven, with the kind of haircut I would have had in the Military Police if I hadn't seen a barber for three weeks and didn't comb it. His eyes were open and seemed focused, staring into the mirror at the foot of his bed. The mouth was twisted, a crooked half-smile that seemed perpetual, the two front teeth protruding slightly beneath the upper lip. His legs and feet were under the sheets, his arms outside them. The right hand was clenched into a claw, but the left was open, even relaxed, except for his middle finger. That one twitched up and down randomly on the sheet, like a woodpecker rotated ninety degrees and battering the ground instead of a tree trunk.

Hernandez talked to him again. "Mr. Cuddy is here about Joe. You remember Joe, don't you?"

No reaction from Martin that I could see. I said, "Can he hear us?"

Hernandez wagged her head slowly and used a normal tone. "We don't really know, but the experts say it's best to speak to him as though he can. We've tried various stimuli, but nothing has worked over the years."

"Years?"

Hernandez went back to the loud voice, running her fingers through his hair. "Martin has been with us for five years now. Haven't you, Martin?"

"What happened to him?"

She looked at me strangely. "Tragedy happened, Mr. Cuddy. An automobile pileup while he was riding on 93 with his parents on

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vacation. They were both killed, and there was nobody back home in Indiana to take him."

"So you did."

"Yes. The state appointed a guardian. The guardian retained an attorney who obtained a handsome settlement from the guilty parties. We have to keep his bed cranked up to allow him to breathe easily, but we're able to keep him comfortable, thanks to the settlement."

"So far as you know."

The strange look again. "Yes. So far as we know."

In the corridor, a wizened woman in a wheelchair was being pushed at a good clip by a twelve-year-old boy. The woman's skin flapped against her neck cords as she went "Vroom, Vroooooom."

I said to Hernandez, "This other one was Luntayne's bed?"

She broke contact with Martin. "Yes." Then in the loud voice, "Joe and you were roommates for over a year, right, Martin?"

Nothing but the erratic finger motion.

I moved to the door side of Luntayne's bed. "Which arm had the Heparin lock in it?"

"The Heparin?"

"Yes."

"Well, I don't—"

The public address system interrupted her. "Mrs. Hernandez, Mrs. Hernandez. Please come to Reception. Mrs. Hernandez."

My guide waited until the breathless voice clicked off. "I'm sorry, Mr. Cuddy."

"Is there anyone else I could speak to?"

An orderly went by the room.

Hernandez said, "Delroy. Delroy?"

The orderly came back, head in door.

"This is Mr. Cuddy, Delroy."

He looked at me suspiciously.

Hernandez said, "Delroy was the one who actually found Joe. Delroy, Mr. Cuddy has some questions to ask you."

The man spoke to her. "You want me to stop what I'm doing or he going to ask them while I'm working?"

I had a feeling I already knew the answer to that one.

Delroy Briggs unfolded an X-frame of metal dowels. "So ask."

I sat on a rigid plastic basket in the utility room while he stretched and fitted a big yellow trashbag over the metal frame. His slender

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hands worked quickly, though he must have been near sixty himself, with the almost blue skin that some black men seem to get as they grow older. His eyes were a little rheumy in a sad face, the bones noticeable at the sockets and at the back of the jaw. The hair was short, shot through with white strands that were still rare enough to stand out.

I said, "When did you find him, Mr. Briggs?"

"About eight."

"P.M."

"That's right."

"What did you think?"

Briggs held his answer through the unfolding of another frame. As he fitted another trashbag, he said, "You family?"

"No."

"Ever know the man?"

"Uh-unh."

"Then what I thought was, 'Thank you, God, for finally taking this bastard from us.' "

I laughed a little, Briggs a little more.

"He was hard to be around?"

"No." Briggs reached for another frame. "No, in fairness to the man, he wasn't like one of these old farts who always whines, or wets hisself. He was more bossy, full of hisself, had to keep letting you know who was paying the bills, paying the salaries of folks like me and the food girls and so on."

"He liked to be in control."

"That's it. That's the man. Old Joe, he'd be setting up in his bed and he'd point that cane of his." Briggs raised his arm, like a man giving directions to a tourist. "And he'd say, 'Delroy, I believe you missed a bit of paper towel under the sink there.' And I'd say, 'Why, thank you, Joe, I do believe you're right.' But it wasn't like with some of the other folks, they like to joke around with you. With Old Joe, it was mind-games. Like he did with Martin."

"Martin?"

"His roommate. Poor boy, he ain't probably got laid yet, he's in this car ac-ci-dent. Come out of it like you seen him in there. But every night I'm making my last pass, like around eleven, eleven-thirty, and Old Joe he's in his room with the light on, talking a blue streak to that poor boy."

"Talking to him like Martin could hear?"

"What? Oh, hell, no. No, more like 'Well, Martin, what do you

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think of the weather lately?' Or 'Don't you think Janine might be a lot of fun under that little blue dress?' Like that. Then he'd wait a minute, then he'd say something else."

"Like Luntayne was having a conversation with Martin?"

"More like Old Joe was just enjoying hearing his own voice, wanting to wait Martin out before talking some more. Like to ag-gravate the poor boy account of he can't talk back. You know what I'm saying?"

"Like controlling Martin by controlling the flow of things."

"Right. Right."

"Mr. Briggs, do you remember which arm had the Heparin lock when you found Luntayne?"

The man paused between frame and bag. "Old Joe, he was just a pincushion, had so many in him while he was here."

"But do you remember which one that night?"

Briggs paused again. "I believe it was the left one."

"So, the door side of the room."

He went back to his job. "Yeah, I guess you could say it that way."

I spotted him outside a three-story townhouse halfway up the block. "Walter Luntayne?"

Shifting the leather strap of the mailbag to a different part of his shoulder, the man turned to me. "Yeah?"

"Mr. Luntayne, my name is John Cuddy. I'm a private investigator."

I handed him my ID folder. Luntayne pushed the parade cap above his forehead to read it. Maybe six feet tall and pudgy, he had reddish hair and a beefy face, a little florid from the weight of the mail he was humping. His legs were painfully pale under the uniform shorts he wore above white socks and black tie-shoes.

Luntayne closed the folder and gave it back. "What's this about?"

"I'm looking into the death of your father."

He shifted the strap again. "Why?"

"Any suspicious death gets investigated."

Luntayne started to grin. "Hey, what's suspicious? He was an old guy, and his heart went pop."

I watched him for a moment. "I take it you aren't too upset by his passing."

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"Upset? You never knew him, right?"

"Right."

Luntayne let the strap slide off and the bag thump onto the sidewalk. "Well, let me tell you how upset I was. When Anne—she's my sister?—when Anne calls me with the news, I say to her, 'Well, looks like Martin's gonna have to find another roommate.' "

Luntayne laughed at his joke. From the pacing of his words, I had the feeling I wasn't the first person to hear it.

"You weren't crazy about your father then."

"Hey, I don't want to sound like some kind of ingrate, but the fact is, you wanted something from the old man, even as a kid, you didn't have to ask for it, you had to beg for it. He was a miser about everything in his life. Money, attention, you name it. He was so tight, he squeaked."

Another laugh.

I said, "Can you tell me what happened the day he died?"

"Sure." Luntayne looked at the stoop behind him. "How about I take a load off?"

"Go ahead."

He used a hand to sweep the third step, then settled himself on it. "Well, it was the old man's birthday, which was about the only time any of us were together to see him. Anne got there first, of course."

"Why of course?"

"She was bringing the cake. Then I got there about six, six-fifteen. And right behind me, the pill-pusher rolled in."

"Your brother Philip?"

"Right. So we all spent a rough hour with the guy, trying to make small talk nobody was interested in hearing, then we cut the cake and left."

"No presents?"

"Well, sure. We had presents. It was the guy's birthday."

"What presents?"

"Let's see. I got him a flannel shirt, account of it gets kind of cold in those rooms there, even in the nice weather. Anne bought him some book he said he already read. And Phil, what—oh yeah, Phil brought him an electric shaver. Probably got it wholesale at the place he works."

"The pharmacy?"

"One of those megajoints with fifty aisles and more security

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guards than cashiers, you know?"

"Did your father appear to be in any discomfort?"

"Just from having us there."

"What do you mean?"

"He liked it better one-on-one. So he could keep things in hand over you without distractions from somebody else."

"When did you leave?"

"We all left about the same time."

Which wasn't the question I asked. "When was that?"

"Maybe seven?"

"So you spent an hour with your dad on his birthday."

"A real long hour. Anything else?"

"I understand you haven't always been a letter carrier."

"That's right."

"I'm wondering what made you leave the other jobs."

"What does that have to do with my father's heart attack?"

"I can always just ask around."

Luntayne mulled that over, then shrugged. "Out of college, I was a high-school teacher. Tried it for a while, couldn't stand the yard-apes I got in my classes. After that—"

"What did you teach?"

"Chemistry. After that, I tried insurance for a while, but I didn't like the hustle, you know? Always having to push things. I've been with the service fourteen years, and it suits me."

"Enough so you'll keep at it?"

"Huh?"

"After you get your inheritance?"

A grunt. "My cut of what's left will be maybe, *maybe* a hundred ten, a hundred twenty thousand. Not exactly enough to retire on."

"But enough to help out."

"I've had my eye on a place at the Cape, all right? This economy, it'd be a good buy. Can I use the money? Sure I can. So can Anne and Phil there."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, Anne, she wants to pull the old ripcord, head out to the country and be some kind of veterinarian saint, but she hears sick cows don't pay as good as sick poodles. And Phil, he just hates being a pill-pusher so much, he'd probably go around the world or something."

"But not you."

Walter Luntayne stood up. "Hey, Uncle Sugar treats me just fine.

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Salary, vacation time, bennies. I'm here till I die."

A third laugh.

Standing in the reception area of the veterinary hospital, I could see Anne Luntayne before she could see me. A stocky woman with fluffy hair, reddish like her brother's. She wore a green smock with some stains down the front of it and blue jeans underneath. Luntayne was turning toward a teenaged boy, also in a green but dirtier smock, handing something to him.

A syringe.

Luntayne heard the receptionist call her name, then point to me. The vet shed her smock, showing a checkered cowboy shirt underneath.

Luntayne walked over. "Can I help you?"

I introduced myself and explained why I was there.

Her eyes, brown, grew wide. "What can there possibly be to investigate?"

"Can we talk somewhere more privately?"

Luntayne looked around, then said, "We have a patio outside."

"Fine."

She led me through a rabbit warren of doors and small rooms with yapping and yowling and other creature noises I couldn't place. Behind the building, we hit an enclosure with a brick floor ten feet square and one round table with those white resin lawn chairs.

"This is our lunch area in good weather. Please, sit down."

I took one chair, she another. Mine gave a little, but was surprisingly comfortable.

The brown eyes fixed on me. "Why are you looking into my father's death?"

"Because of the way his will is written."

That threw her. Then, "You mean the part about none of us getting the money if one of us . . . killed him?"

"Let's start with that day. When did you all arrive?"

"I don't know. I guess I was first to get there."

"Why?"

"I picked up the cake."

"Why you?"

"Out of a sense of duty, if not affection, Mr. Cuddy. If it were up to either of my brothers, my father would have nothing but a couple

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of catalog presents he didn't need."

"What time did you get there?"

"I don't know. Six, maybe?"

"Who arrived when?"

"Me first, then Walter, then Philip."

"When did you leave?"

"About seven, I suppose. It wasn't a particularly pleasant time. It never is."

"Why?"

"Mr. Cuddy, my father is . . . *was* not what you would call a good man or a good father. He was a war hero and always thought that put him above everyone else, as if he were a scientist objectively observing us during an experiment. I saw enough of people like that in college and vet school to know what I'm talking about. He was a cold, manipulating man, and if you want to hear any words of regret from me, you'll be in that chair a long, long time."

"Did you and your brothers all leave at the same time?"

"From my father's room, you mean?"

"Yes."

"We did. He—my father—was getting tired. Or faking it, having grown weary of having us standing around him and knowing we weren't enjoying ourselves."

"Could either of your brothers have gone back to the room?"

Luntayne paused. "You mean . . . what? To smother him or something?"

"Or something."

Her lips narrowed. "I suppose so. There aren't any restrictions at the home as to when you get there or when you leave. I suppose one of them could have doubled back without me noticing."

"Would either of your brothers have a reason to do that?"

"Money, hate, the accumulated distaste of a lifetime. Philip would love the money, especially."

"Why especially?"

"He doesn't enjoy being a pharmacist. He never had the brains for med school, but I think he liked the idea of dispensing cure-alls more than the practice of it. He doesn't like people much, that man."

"And you?"

"Me?" She waved a hand at the building behind us. "I've cast my lot for animals, Mr. Cuddy. They are far better patients and far more grateful for any kindness you show them."

"Any thoughts of leaving the hospital?"

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"No. Oh, I've toyed with it from time to time. Fantasized about being a real vet out where livestock needs one. But I've grown a little too accustomed to the city life."

"How about Walter?"

"The sloth bear?"

I just looked at her.

"That's what my father always called him, because he was so big and lazy. I suppose Walter could . . . do something to my father. We none of us care much for the others, the one shared legacy from our father. But I doubt Walter would do anything. He's more the neighborhood slob who can't let go of a joke once he's told it."

Anne Luntayne shook her head. "Do you know what he said when I called him about our father being dead?"

"Let me guess."

The security guard pointed to a gawky man in a white Nehru jacket. Philip Luntayne was standing on a raised platform behind some low glass in the back of the store. I passed down an aisle with everything from potato chips to suppositories. My target stepped from the platform with a vial of pills, handing it to a black woman who asked him a series of questions. Luntayne nodded twice and smiled once, but as soon as the woman turned away, he snarled at her back. Then he noticed me and exchanged the snarl for a "Yes?"

I outlined the situation, which revived the snarl. Around it, Luntayne said, "Perhaps we should step in back."

There was a jail cell of an office with a refrigerator and two cracked vinyl chairs. We sat across from each other, three feet apart, Luntayne having trouble arranging his legs. Everything about him was disproportioned to the long side. Legs, fingers, face, even the gene-pool reddish hair, which wasn't so much stylish as neglected.

"I don't know what I could possibly tell you."

"Start with what happened at the nursing home that day."

Philip gave me the same sequence as his siblings.

Then I thought of something I hadn't asked the others. "Did you leave the cake with your father?"

"No. No, he barely touched it, and of course Wally didn't have any, so we gave some of it to one of the orderlies and Anne had to carry most of it home."

"Why didn't Walter have any?"

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"He's diabetic."

"Which orderly did you leave the rest of the cake with?"

"Oh, I don't know. Kind of a skinny black man, sort of watery eyes."

"Delroy Briggs?"

"I really couldn't say. What difference does that make?"

"Probably none. Could your brother or sister have doubled back after you all left your father's room?"

Luntayne pulled on his jaw, making his face momentarily longer. "Why would either of them do that?"

"Your father's money was going to Pineview at the rate of five grand a month."

"So? It *was* his money."

"But it, or what was left of it, would be yours."

"One-third mine, so long as none of us pushed him to the other side. Don't think I hadn't thought of it, though."

"But it would have been wrong."

"No. Ridding the planet of that terrible man would have been right. It's just that the risk was too great. Besides, I rather liked the thought of him incapacitated enough to become as frustrated as we were growing up."

"How so?"

"Let me count the ways. He was never, *never* satisfied at any accomplishment we might achieve. Wally at least had the excuse of his condition and weight, but Anne and me? Driven to succeed but never rewarded for any accomplishment."

"Is that why you went into pharmacy?"

"No. No, I rather slid into this. Thought it would be an easy life. Instead, it's like being a toll-taker in reverse."

"Or a letter carrier?"

"Wally, Wally. Let me tell you, I think he's finally found his niche in life. No ambition required, though no possibility of getting a leg up on his dreamhouse at the Cape."

"A retirement spot?"

"Yes. As though a government employee would notice the difference between working and retiring. But Anne, now, what she wouldn't give for an extra hundred thousand or so—let her become the James Herriott of *New* England."

"And you?"

"Me?"

"Like to get out of the tollbooth?"

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"Oh, yes. Someday. Soon, even."

"Why soon?"

A smile that would curdle cream. "Now that my hundred or so will be dropped in my lap. And not in quarters, either." Luntayne checked his watch. "Unfortunately, though, I really must get back to the halt and the lame."

"One last question?"

"Certainly."

"You still need a prescription to get a syringe in this state?"

The smile disappeared completely, but Philip Luntayne did nod his head.

I sat in my office and looked out the window at the trees on the Boston Common. Each of Joseph Luntayne's children despised him, and each had a good use for one-third of the estate. If their father died before Pineview got all of his money. Only problem was, I had no evidence to prove which, if any, sibling might have done something about it.

I lowered my eyes to the Park Street subway station. Some homeless people cadged the tourists for spare change. Two past-prime folk singers had a guitar case opened in front of them with some dollar bills fluttering optimistically toward the power of suggestion. A man in a wheelchair with a knob on a stalk near his mouth, briefcase in his lap, motored past all of them without a sideways glance.

I got an idea. It wasn't much of one, but it might be worth a few telephone calls.

"Pineview Nursing Home."

It sounded like the fat woman behind the counter in the lobby. "Mrs. Hernandez, please."

"She's not at her desk."

"I'd appreciate your paging her."

A huff, then: "Hold on." Two minutes of Muzak followed by a click.

"This is Mrs. Hernandez."

"John Cuddy. I have a couple more questions for you."

"Yes?"

"What's Martin's last name?"

"Martin? You mean Joe's roommate?"

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"Yes."

A hesitation. "It's Dallman. Martin Dallman. But why?"

"Any surviving relatives?"

Another full stop. "His parents were killed in the accident. I don't think— No, I'm sure there were no other relatives. But what's this about?"

"Please, Mrs. Hernandez, just bear with me a minute. Where in Indiana was Martin from?"

"I'd have to look that up."

"Would you?"

"Police Department, Sergeant Cole."

"I'm speaking to the Prentice, Indiana, police?"

"Sure are."

"Sergeant, my name is John Cuddy. I'm a private investigator in Boston and I'd appreciate some help."

"Sure thing, if I can."

"I'm trying to trace any neighbors of a family named Dallman."

"Dallman, Dallman . . . Family got killed in that auto crash back by you all?"

"Right."

Cole sucked in a breath. "Lordy, that was some time ago. Let me think. I believe Edna Peese might have been living out to them back then."

"Can you spell that last name?"

"Sure thing. Let me dig out her number for you, too."

"Thanks."

"No pro-blame-oh."

"Hello?"

"Edna Peese?"

"Hello?"

I repeated the name, a little louder.

"Yes. Yes, this is Edna Peese. Who might you be?"

I told her.

"What could a private investigator from Boston want with me?"

"I'm calling about the Dallman family."

"Oh, what a terrible thing. Just terrible. Five years ago at least, but I still can't bear to picture what happened to those good people."

"I wonder if you knew Martin?"

"Martin? Of course I did. They lived catty-corner to me since he

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was a pup. Martin used to mow my lawn and trim my hedges. I never saw him after the accident—don't have the kind of money to go back East. But has he . . . improved any?"

"I don't think so."

"Poor boy. Poor, poor boy. Such a nice youngster, always interested in history, too."

History. "What kind of history?"

"The eighteen hundreds. Always studying up on cowboys and Indians, Union Pacific and Western Union, buffalo hunts and cattle drives. Not to mention all the hoopla and gadgetry that went with them."

"How about World War II?"

"World War II?"

"Yes."

"My, not that I recollect. He was more into the last century than this one. Right to be, too, given what it did to him."

"I'm sorry?"

"That car crash. Would never have happened back in the Old West."

Dead end. Hanging up the telephone, I looked back out the window. Same panhandlers, same singers, even the same man in a wheelchair, this time heading back the other way, using his mouth on the knob to push the stalk back and forth like a throttle, maneuvering around the people or things that didn't yield to him.

I thought about it, then picked up the receiver and dialed my client's number. After a receptionist and secretary, I heard, "Stanton Wilcox."

"Mr. Wilcox, John Cuddy."

"Yes?"

"When I was in your office, you told me that back in the war, you'd stand guard and Joseph Luntayne would work the transmitter, right?"

"That's correct."

"Because he was 'better at it,' you said."

Impatience creeped into the lawyer's voice. "Also correct."

"Better at what, Mr. Wilcox?"

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Stanton Wilcox and I got to Joseph Luntayne's old room together. After a while, I called the three siblings and told each that his or her inheritance hinged on being at Pineview within the hour. Philip the pharmacist arrived first, Walter the mailman second. Anne the vet walked in with Mrs. Hernandez ten minutes later. Which made seven of us, including Martin Dallman.

Anne said, "What's going on?"

Philip tugged on his chin. "Stanton and Mr. Cuddy won't tell us."

Mrs. Hernandez crossed her arms. "Well, they'd better tell me."

I asked everybody to sit down. The three Luntaynes did.

I looked from face to face. "I know what happened here on your father's birthday."

Walter said, "What do you mean?"

"All of you told me how much your father enjoyed being in control. It struck me as odd that someone like that would want someone like Martin as his roommate."

I looked over to the other bed. Martin Dallman stared straight ahead at his mirror, the smile still crooked, the finger still twitching.

Mrs. Hernandez said, "It's not so strange. Several of our residents prefer . . . inactive roommates. That way, the sentient roommate can watch television or go to sleep without disturbing or being disturbed by the other."

Anne said, "Dad also told me he liked the fact that Martin couldn't exactly rifle through his stuff."

I nodded. "But wouldn't you think your father would get even more enjoyment from being able to control his roommate, too?"

Walter said, "How could you control Martin?"

"By limiting his means of communication."

Mrs. Hernandez uncrossed her arms, slapping her thighs in the process. "Martin can't . . . communicate."

"Delroy Briggs told me he'd hear Joseph Luntayne talking with Martin."

Anne said, "Who in the world is Delroy Briggs?"

Philip said, "One of the orderlies, according to Mr. Cuddy." The pharmacist turned to me. "But everyone *talks* to Martin. He just can't hear it."

"Yes, he can."

Enough people said, "What?" that I couldn't tell who was first.

I said, "Martin can hear. And see. But a lot of wires got crossed by the accident, so he can't communicate except in one way."

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Mrs. Hernandez put a sarcastic edge on her voice. "And what way is that?"

"Briggs told me that Luntayne would pause while talking to Martin, here in the room, with the lights on. Why have the lights on? And why did Luntayne, who seemed to enjoy having Martin around, always make sure Mr. Wilcox was never around him for more than a few seconds on each visit?"

The vet looked at her brothers, but neither seemed forthcoming. "All right. I'll bite. Why?"

"Martin loved the Old West. Studied up on it, including the gadgets from the era. Even learned something along the way."

The pharmacist said, "What?"

"Telegraphy."

The postal worker said, "He can read our minds?"

"Not telepathy, Walter. Telegraphy. Morse code. The one wire the accident didn't cross. Martin's twitching is really tapping. Tapping out messages in Morse code. In his mirror, he saw who doubled back to this room that night, who took out a syringe, probably loaded with potassium chloride. All of you had access to syringes, Anne and Philip through their professions, Walter through his diabetes and insulin prescription. All of you also had access to potassium chloride, a simple enough compound for a vet or a pharmacist or even a former chemistry teacher. But even though only one of you did it, all of you lose out on the inheritance because of it."

Mrs. Hernandez said, "You mean Martin told you somebody killed Joseph?"

"Once Mr. Wilcox watched Martin's finger long enough, the message was pretty obvious. Martin even told us what the killer said as the injection was flooding into the veins and toward the heart. What was it, Martin?"

Everyone watched the man in the bed as the finger drummed on the sheet.

Stanton Wilcox translated. " 'Well, Martin, it looks like you're going to need a new roommate.' "

The five of us who could turn our heads stared at Walter Luntayne. The mail carrier just stared at Martin's finger.

"Q"

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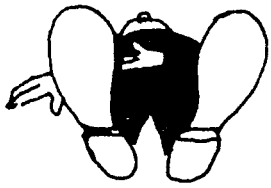

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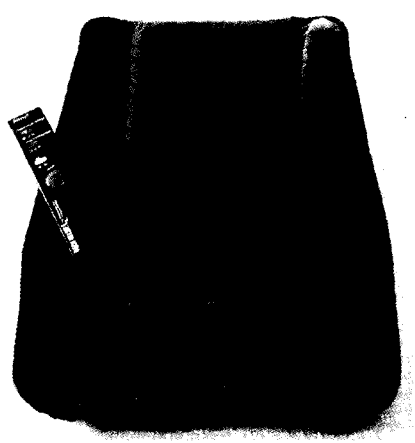

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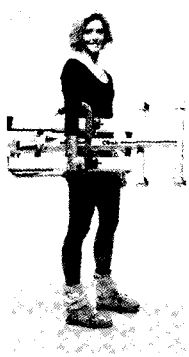

TO ORDER: Send check with item number for total amounts, plus shipping & handling shown in ( ) payable to **MAIL ORDER MALL** DEPT 032 EL, PO. Box 3006, Lakewood, N.J. 08701, or call TOLL FREE **1-800-722-9999**. NJ residents add 7% sales tax. We honor MasterCard, Visa, and American Express. Sorry, no Canadian, foreign, or C.O.D. orders. **30 day money back guarantee for exchange or refund.**

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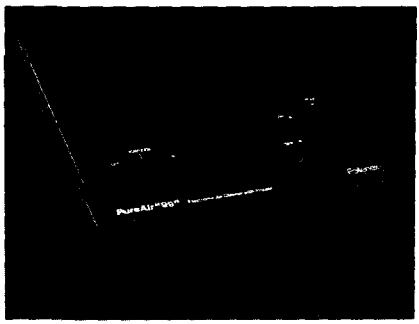
▼ FRESH AIR

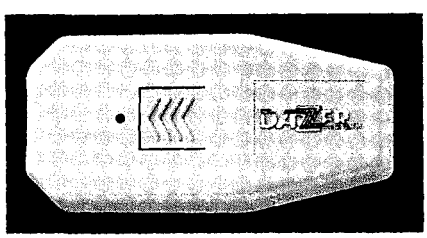


Concern about air pollution is on the rise. The Pollenex® Pure Air "99" Air Cleaner with Ionizer will help clear the air around you. A high voltage generator produces negative ions that help reduce minute particles of dust, tobacco smoke and other airborne pollutants. An electrostatic air filter intercepts larger airborne particles and has a deodorizing action too. Two speed air flow control. So now you can breathe easier with Pure Air "99". **$69.98** ($7.50) #A1962; 2 for **$125.98** ($10.00) #1962/2

► D-BUG LIGHT

Don't let flying pests spoil your next outdoor activity. Just bring along the D-Bug Light, electronic bug killer lantern. More than just a great bug zapper, this unit combines the zapper with a fluorescent lantern and a safety blinker. Portable and easy to carry with its own handle, the D-Bug Light is made of high impact durable plastic. Uses two 6 volt batteries (not inc.) 12 volt DC receptacle adapts to car, RV or boat battery, so its great for camping, boating, picnics, backyards. So don't let bugs spoil your outdoor fun—just "de-bug"! **$59.98** ($5.00) #A1964.

▼ THE DAZER™



Even the most dedicated canine afi cionado can sometimes encounter u friendly dogs. Dazer™ provides a humar way to repel their advance, emitting ultr sonic sound waves inaudible to humans ar totally safe for dogs (unlike mace and oth common deterrents). Pocket size (4¾" lon plastic case can also clip on belt; takes 1-9 battery, included. For joggers, hikers, bike seniors and kids—plus the proverbial po man. **$29.98**, ($3.00) #A1829X.

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